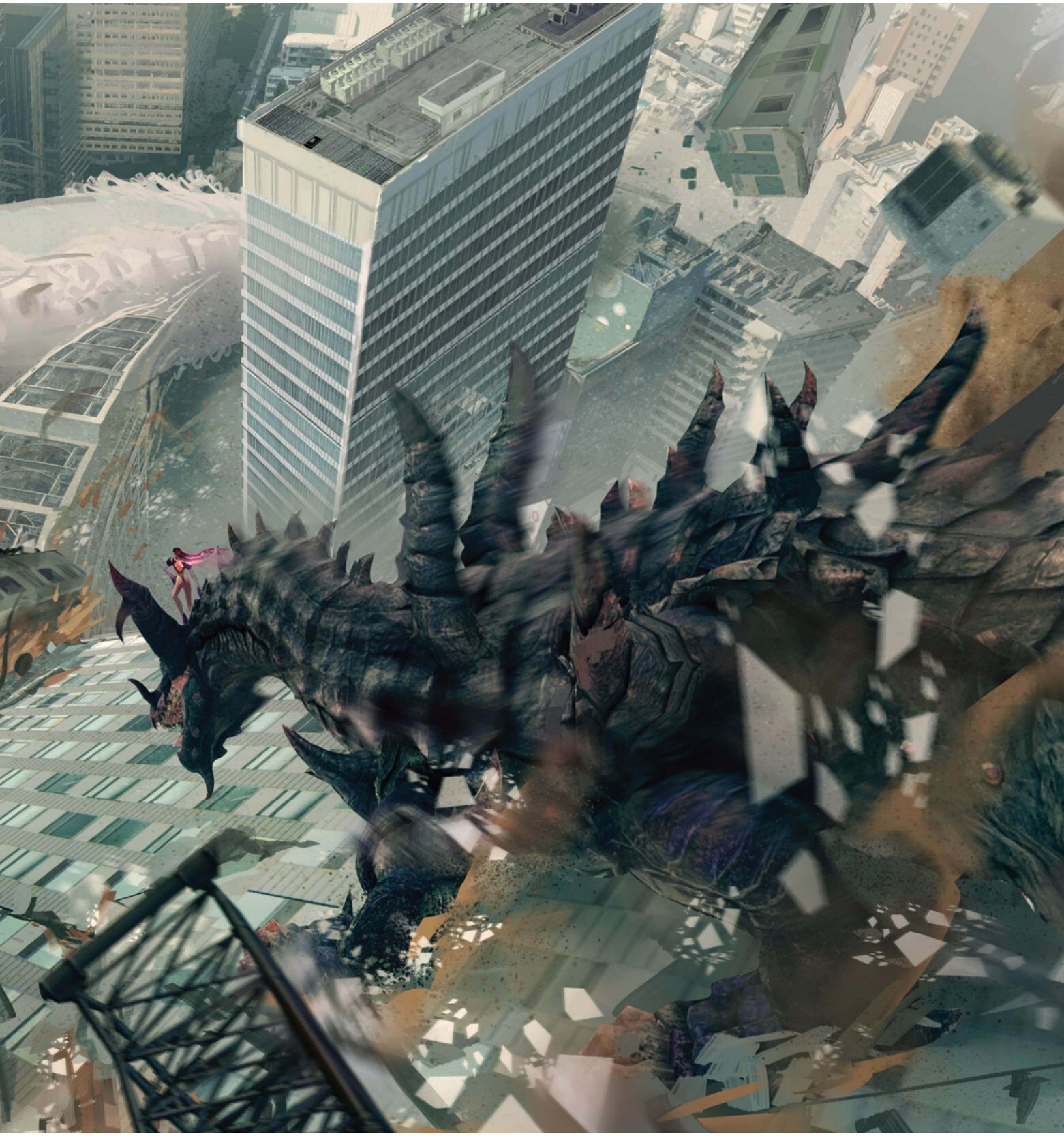
GAMEINFORMER®

↘ **From our cover story:** Demon Slave appears in wacky traversal setpieces as well as combat.

Developed by PlatinumGames / Published by Nintendo



EDITOR'S NOTE

A FOND FAREWELL

ANDREW REINER
Editor-In-Chief

WHAT I'M PLAYING
Tinykin, Fortnite, Splatoon 3, Immortality

WHAT I'M WATCHING
The Lord of the Rings: Rings of Power, She-Hulk, Sandman

WHAT I'M READING
Thunderbolts, Amazing Spider-Man, Batman

FAVORITE STAR WARS CHARACTER
Garindan

I never thought I would write these words: I'm leaving *Game Informer*.

For nearly 30 years, I looked forward to each workday, eager to see what game news would break, what I would be writing about, and on the best days, what I would be playing. In the time it took to create 330 monthly magazines, I was privileged to work alongside some of the most talented and amazing people I've ever met. For a kid who couldn't get enough of video games growing up, I was living a dream. I knew how lucky I was and never took it for granted. I worked hard. I wanted *Game Informer* to be the place to go to celebrate games. I think we accomplished that tenfold and have created an outlet unlike any other.

In the weeks ahead, I'll transition from writing game news to creating it. I'm entering the world of game development at Gearbox Software. I've always wanted to make a game, and now I get the chance to see what development is all about and hopefully contribute to the process in meaningful ways. I'm terrified of entering a new line of work, but I couldn't be more excited as I'm about to live another dream. I hope this one lasts just as long as my writing career and is equally as rewarding as *Game Informer* was.

I'm proud of what I accomplished as a writer, but I will mostly remember the people I worked with. I couldn't ask for a better team. We were (and always will be) family. We celebrated games together as much as we celebrated our lives.

Game Informer will continue to be an incredible outlet for games, and I'm already seeing an exciting future unfold under the guidance of my friend Matt Miller (your new editor-in-chief). *Game Informer's* collective love of video games cannot be understated. It's one of the things I will miss the most as I depart. The staff knows why games are special. We celebrated them every day through our writing and videos.

To the millions of *Game Informer* subscribers and readers who were on this ride with me, thank you for taking a chance on me and making me feel like I belonged here. I had the time of my life writing reviews, reflecting on the games of yesteryear on Replay, and meeting you in person at trade shows. To the game developers and publishers I worked with, I owe you just as big of a "thank you" for recognizing that *Game Informer* matters. An even bigger "thank you" is deserved for tolerating Andy McNamara and me in meetings. We were professionals; we just didn't look or act the part.

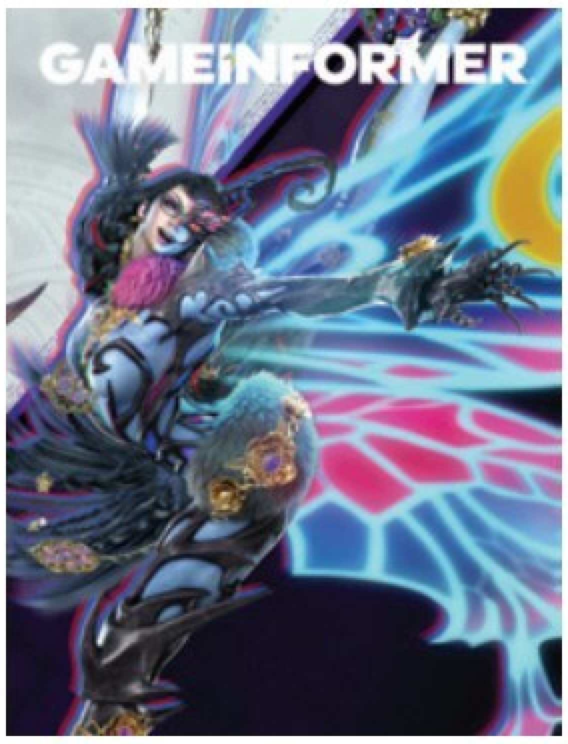
This isn't goodbye. Not even close. Our next "hello" will just be a little different. I still want to talk about games and play them late into the night with anyone out there. Rather than writing about games, however, I will be working with incredibly talented teams that make them. How cool is that?

I can't wait for my next chapter to begin, and I can't wait to get the next issue of *Game Informer* in my mailbox.

Keep gaming, everyone, and use me as an example of how dreams can come true. If you have passion and truly chase a dream, it can become the life you always wanted. I'm living proof of that.

Thank you for all the support! Thank you! Thank you!! Thank you!!!

All the best,



BAYONETTA 3

For our blowout cover story on Bayonetta 3, *Game Informer* visited Nintendo of America to play roughly an hour of the new game, split between two primary sections highlighting the unique playstyles of Bayonetta and new protagonist, Viola. We also completed extensive interviews with the development team overseas. On the cover, Bayonetta is channeling the power of Madama Butterfly to illustrate the fascinating Demon Masquerade feature. Turn to the back cover to see Madama Butterfly in her full and untethered nature.

GAMEINFORMER

Volume XXXII / Number 9 / Issue 350

Publisher
Chris Pieretti

Editor-in-Chief
Andrew Reiner

Magazine Content Director
Matt Miller
Regrettably sold motorcycle to afford college

Online Content Director
Brian Shea

Senior Associate Editor
Blake Hester

Associate Editors
Jason Guisao
Wesley LeBlanc
Marcus Stewart

Video Editor
Alex Van Aken
Refuses to nickname his Pokémon

Production Director
Margaret Andrews
Plays renegade in almost every video game

Senior Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin

Graphic Designer
Mónica Rexach Ortiz

Web Designers/Programmers
Kristin Williams
Jon Woodey
Flew to South Korea to perform with dance team

Office Manager
Sarah Hansen

Advertising Manager
Janey Stringer

Marketing Coordinator
Rachel Castle

Contributors
Diego Nicolás Argüello
John Carson
Aron Garst
Justin Koreis
Nico Vergara
Bryan Vore

Our next issue launches digitally on 11/8
with the print edition to follow

For renewal, address change and
Power Up Rewards Pro details:
Web: **gamestop.com/faq**
Email: **care@gamestop.com**
Mail to: **625 Westport Parkway**
Grapevine, TX 76051 • Attn: Guest Care
For subscription inquiry only:
800-883-8895

Manufactured and printed in the United States of America. The Editor welcomes company product information for all video games. Such materials should be addressed to: Editor, Game Informer® Magazine, PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Copyright in all screenshots contained within this publication are owned by their respective companies. Products named in these pages are trade names, or trademarks, of their respective companies. All rights reserved; reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Game Informer® is a trademark of GameStop. PUBLISHER LIABILITY FOR ERROR The publisher shall not be liable for slight changes or typographical errors that do not lessen the value of an advertisement. The publisher's liability for other errors or omissions in connection with an advertisement is limited to republication of the advertisement in any subsequent issue or the refund of any monies paid for the advertisement. INDEMNIFICATION The advertiser and/or Advertising Agency agrees to defend and indemnify the publisher against any and all liability, loss, or expense arising from claims of libel, unfair competition, unfair trade practices, infringement of trademarks, copyrights, trade names, patents, or proprietary rights or violation of rights of privacy, resulting from the publication of the Advertiser's statement.

Game Informer® Volume 32 Issue 350 October 2022 (ISSN: 1067-6392) is published monthly except April and December, at a subscription price of $19.99, by Sunrise Publications®, PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011. Business, Editorial Offices, Accounting and Circulation Offices: PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011. To subscribe or for customer service inquiries call 1-800-883-8895. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/year additional postage. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order, or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for $12.00 (includes $7.00 S&H). Periodicals postage paid at St Paul, MN 55164-5015 and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS: Send address changes to Game Informer®, 625 Westport Parkway Grapevine, TX 76051 Attn: Guest Care. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS. See DMM 507.1.5.2); NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to (Game Informer®, PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011).

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Jason Guisao

Associate Editor

I love Madden – there, I said it! I'm aware of the series' major drawbacks, but the pull of each new Franchise Mode is too great to ignore. In Madden 16, I coached the Baltimore Ravens for 22 years and created the winningest football dynasty of all time. And did I mention I played 15-minute quarters with no play clock? The subsequent entries haven't kept me glued to my screen, but Madden 23 is off to a great start; I've already spent five hours drafting the perfect fantasy team (shout out to reloading checkpoints!). Hopefully another 22-plus years of gridiron superstardom await.

Kristin Williams

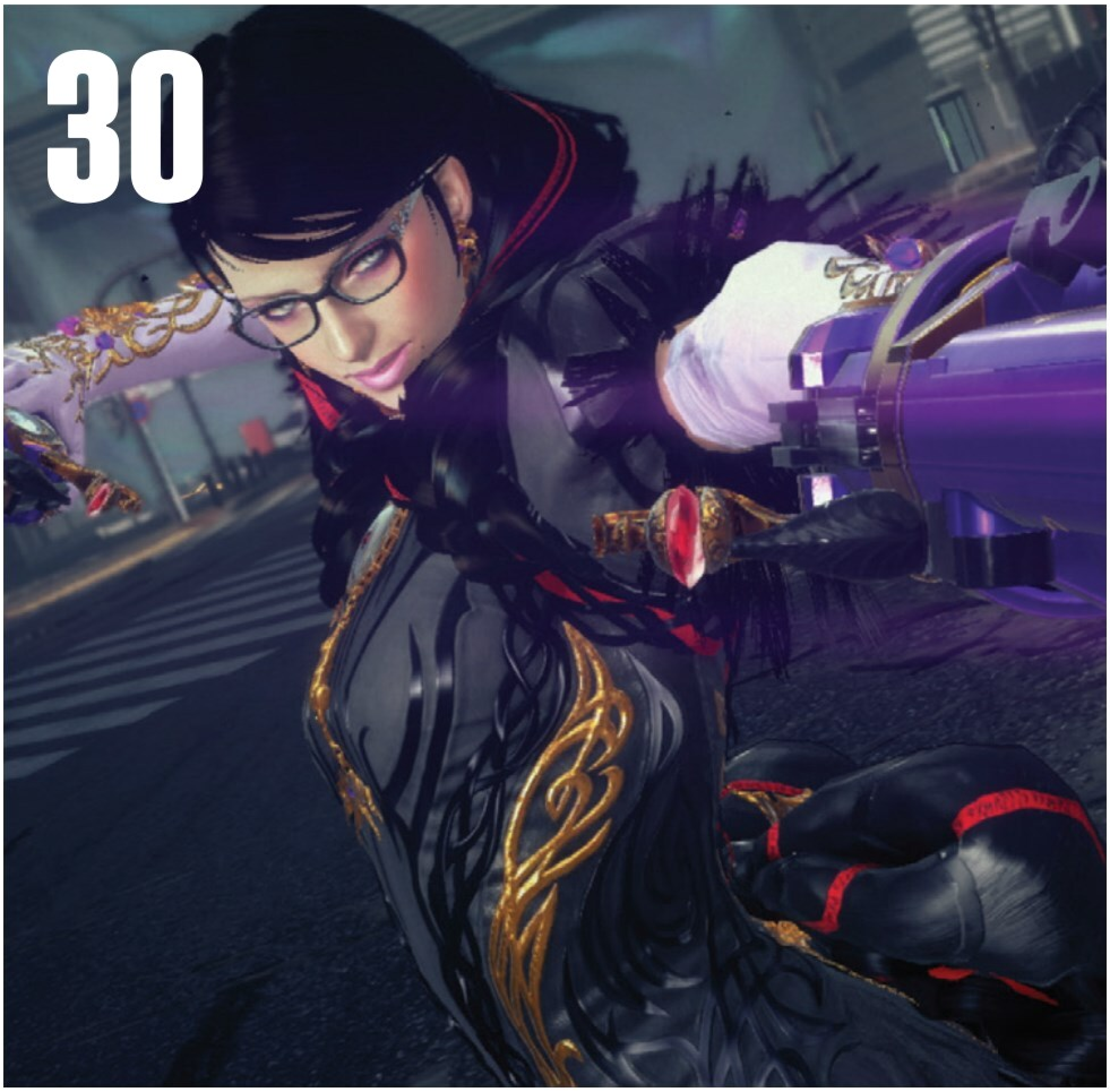
Web Designer/Programmer

One thing that often surprises people about Minnesota (where *Game Informer* is based) is our idea of a salad. If you're in the mood to try out a local classic for your next gaming meet-up, here's my recipe for Caramel Apple Snicker Salad:

1 (5.1-oz) box instant vanilla pudding
½ cup milk
6 apples, cored and chopped
6 Snickers bars, chopped
1 tub whipped topping
1 cup mini marshmallows
½ cup caramel sauce

Whisk pudding and milk together in a large bowl. Fold in whipped topping, then add apples, Snickers, and marshmallows. Drizzle caramel on top.

Contents



GOD IS GANGSTA
JOIN THE HERD
tiny tim's
ASCII about our soup!
24

spotlight

10 SEEING CRYSTAL-CLEAR WORLDS

Sony's first foray into virtual reality didn't set the world on fire. But undeterred, it's trying again. We've gone hands-on (eyes-on?) with the new PSVR headset; is the better resolution enough to convert non-believers?

20 LAYING THE SMACKDOWN

With more than 100 stages, Neon White is a masterclass in level design. To find out how they did it, we talked to the development team about making the level "Smackdown" from start to finish.

24 WHAT I LEARNED MAKING MY THESIS GAME

As we bid a fond farewell to Jason Guisao, who's moving onto a bright future in game development, he pens one final feature for us – this time about the lessons he learned making his own video game at NYU Game Center.

30 COVER STORY – BAYONETTA 3

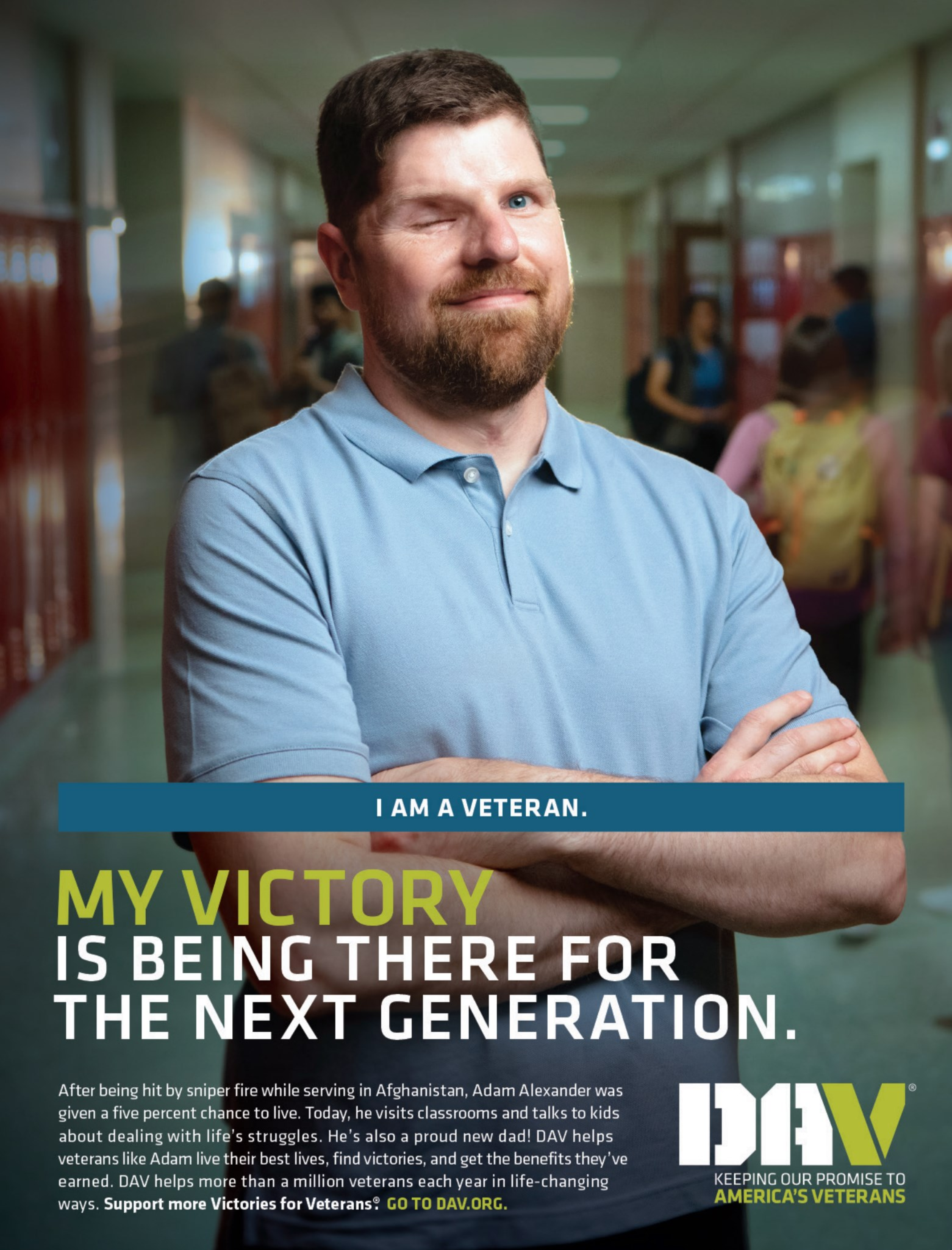
At long last, the witch queen is back. It's been a long time coming for Bayonetta 3, but with its October release fast approaching, we finally played the game and talked to its development team. Read our in-depth cover story for all the info you need to know.

48 THE FUTURE OF ASSASSIN'S CREED

Ubisoft recently pulled back the curtain on its plans for the future of Assassin's Creed. We've got the inside scoop about what's next and why you should care.

regulars

02 EDITOR'S NOTE // **03** STAFF SPOTLIGHT // **06** REPLIES // **26** GEAR
28 OPINION // **62** PREVIEWS // **74** REVIEWS // **84** ONE LAST THING



I AM A VETERAN.

MY VICTORY
IS BEING THERE FOR
THE NEXT GENERATION.

After being hit by sniper fire while serving in Afghanistan, Adam Alexander was given a five percent chance to live. Today, he visits classrooms and talks to kids about dealing with life's struggles. He's also a proud new dad! DAV helps veterans like Adam live their best lives, find victories, and get the benefits they've earned. DAV helps more than a million veterans each year in life-changing ways. **Support more Victories for Veterans®.** **GO TO DAV.ORG.**

DAV®
KEEPING OUR PROMISE TO
AMERICA'S VETERANS

Replies

GOD OF WAR RAGNARÖK

I'm surprised Sony is saying God of War Ragnarök is a final chapter. I thought for sure we'd get a trilogy. Revealing this information before the game releases is brilliant because it raises many questions: Will Kratos die? Are they moving on to another mythology at the end of this story? Will Kratos kill every Norse god? I can't wait to learn why Sony is being so upfront about this reveal months before the game hits store shelves. **– Connor Webb via email**

I've been gaming for 30 years, and I'm glad Kratos is growing gray with me. Solid Snake is another protagonist with a bit of pepper in his mustache. Not many other game characters age with their audience. I still want these heroes to be capable in their fields of expertise, but maybe they stumble a little bit due to a bad back or reduced reflex speed. Progressing a story is good, especially if a new generation or descendant is on the horizon. The Uncharted series ended with a flash forward to a sequel that I hope Naughty Dog makes. Uncharted doesn't just have to be about Nathan Drake. **– Killian Stephenson, Minot, ND**

I don't want to spoil the first God of War game for anyone, but I feel the second chapter will focus more on Atreus than Kratos. I'm not saying we'll play as "the boy," but he has the most to gain or lose. The shocking revelations about his life have to play out in this sequel. With that said, the father/son dynamic will be fascinating. I can't wait to see what happens! **– Jenna Lawrence via email**

↳ During our time talking to God of War Ragnarök's development team, no one wanted to say anything about the story for fear of spoiling it. Kratos and Atreus' relationship will be a big part of it, and we must assume we'll get a conclusion for both. We can't wait to see why Sony is so secretive with the story. If we had to guess, Kratos and Atreus' adventures are just beginning and will likely move to a different mythology.

CORRECTION: In issue 349, an error identified God of War Ragnarök's Lead UX Designer as Mila Parvis. The designer's name is Mila Pavlin. We apologize for the error.

SHIGERU MIYAMOTO

What happened to Shigeru Miyamoto? He was a staple at all of Nintendo's E3 press conferences yet seemingly vanished when the pandemic hit. I know he's been eyeing retirement, but I was hoping we'd get another visionary game from him. **– Margaret Buchanan, Bowling Green, KY**

↳ Nintendo's legendary game creator is still in the Mushroom Kingdom and shows what it could look like as a theme park and motion picture. Miyamoto was heavily involved in creating Universal Studios' Super Nintendo World and is also working on Illumination's untitled Super Mario movie starring Chris Pratt as the plumber. Once these projects wrap, we hope Miyamoto returns to games, hopefully in the directorial chair for another Zelda or Mario.

NEW EXPERIENCES

People complain about how many sequels we get, yet they don't show much excitement for new intellectual properties until proven good. Gamescom's Opening Night Livestream gave us first looks at well over a dozen new game series, yet most people said the show was terrible because no heavy hitters were there. Moonbreaker, Lies of P, and Everywhere look promising and could be the start of new series' we herald as gaming greats. Maybe people just like to complain, but I'm beginning to think they don't know what they want. **– Brennan Walker via Twitter**

↳ Part of the problem is we're not seeing much gameplay from intellectual properties at first glance. The days of lengthy E3 gameplay clips appear to be gone. It's hard to latch onto a vision for a game when you don't even know what it looks like. We see a lot of CG trailers and mood-setting clips. Is there legitimate value in showing these teasers when the viewer only walks away with a name and an idea of what it may be? That's a question we often discuss at Game Informer. We miss the E3 approach and hope the show's return in 2023 can bring back those deep dives into games we're currently missing.

Reader art submission: Angelique Maldonado

HOGWARTS LEGACY

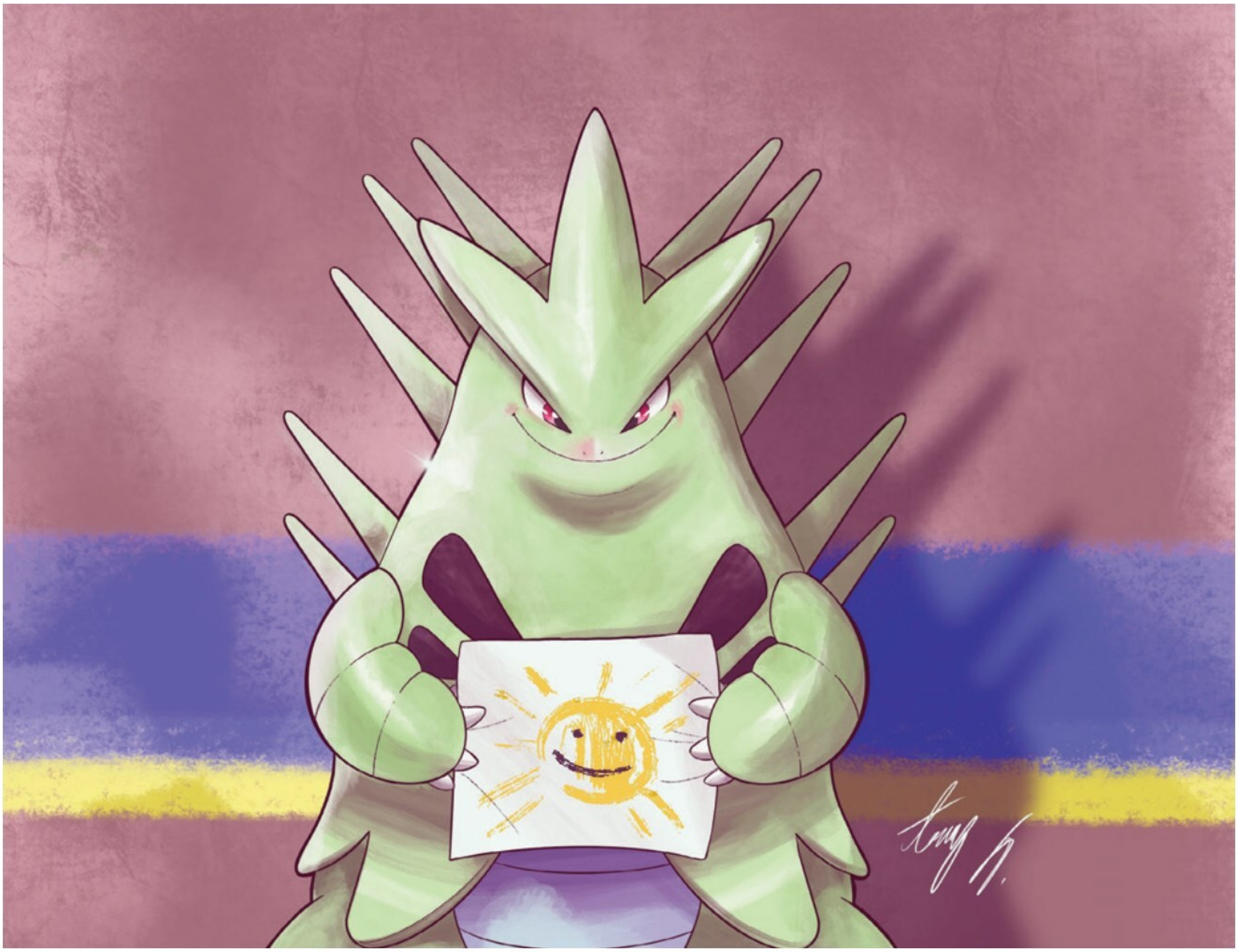
Games When I was a kid, there was nothing better than Harry Potter. My mom read the books to me almost every night, and we went to the theater on opening night to see the movies. I now feel like I must hide my fandom because of the controversy surrounding Harry Potter's creator, J. K. Rowling. It's a strange place to be in because Harry Potter continues to be everywhere. I buy the Lego sets and can't wait to play Hogwarts Legacy, which looks to be the most accurate video game representation of this universe to date. I know there's no correct answer to what to do moving forward, but I will continue to be a fan, even if I disagree with the creator's views. **– Sarah Jensen, Sacramento, CA**

You said it yourself. There's no right answer to how to separate a creative work from its creator, much less a separate project in a new medium that derives from that work. For some, strong disagreement with Rowling's recent public stances on the trans community are reason enough to avoid anything connected to the franchise she built. For others, the universe of the wizarding world has expanded beyond the scope of a single voice, and a game like Hogwarts Legacy can be enjoyed on its own merits. Make your own call about how you feel and where you spend your entertainment time and money and take comfort that you're not alone in feeling conflicted on this one.

Join the conversation

Send your questions, comments, and rants to Feedback@GameInformer.com

@gameinformer
officialgameinformer
@gameinformermagazine
GameInformer



Reader art submission: Troy Joseph

CYBERPUNK 2077

Following a substantial patch earlier this year, Cyberpunk 2077 is now the game I was hoping it would be. It's my favorite game on PlayStation 5, looking genuinely next gen in its visuals and feeling it through the extraordinary DualSense functionality. And it rocks as a game in which you can lose hundreds of hours of your life. The storytelling and choice are pretty good. Now that CD Projekt RED has made good on making the game better, should it be re-entered into Game of the Year discussions for 2022? **– Jabari S. via email**

↳ ***Cyberpunk 2077 isn't the only game that needed to incubate for a couple of years following release. No Man's Sky is another example of a game torn to shreds for not delivering on the initial vision. Hello Games more than made good on that. No Man Sky is now one of gaming's greatest success stories regarding iteration and post-launch support. Cyberpunk 2077 could follow the same path if CD Projekt RED continues to support it. We should note that the PC version was great out of the gate, but the console versions weren't even close to delivering the same experience. Now the new-gen offerings are.***

Soundoff:

The Greatest Console of All Time

We asked our Discord community what their favorite system was and what games they played on it. Here are their responses:

This is a tough question because nostalgia blurs the way you remember things. I think the PS2 would be my answer. The Metal Gear Solid E3 reveal, and the fact I could still play all my PS1 games sold me on it. I completed so many games on it, but Metal Gear Solid 2 might be the first I 100 percent completed outside of Super Mario World. I mainly played RPG games, but also Shadow of the Colossus. I also had online and did the hard-drive install to play online Final Fantasy XI. **– RawkPartee**

While I will forever be a Nintendo fanboy, the PC is the best system of all time, and it's not even close. The PC has Xbox Games Pass and operates like a high-powered Xbox with your friend list, and everything else Xbox has. Steam is the most consumer-friendly storefront offering a two-hour window to return digital purchases. Plus, Gabe [Newell] has blessed us with an amazing community ecosystem with the best user reviews and community forums in gaming. Additionally, Steam's achievements rival Microsoft. The variety of games and preservation of classics is top-notch. You can even play Sony exclusives like God of War and Horizon – at higher framerates and higher resolutions (depending on your system). I see consoles as a great entry point into gaming, but if you are going to make gaming your main hobby, you need a solid PC rig. **– NinjaMasterDave**

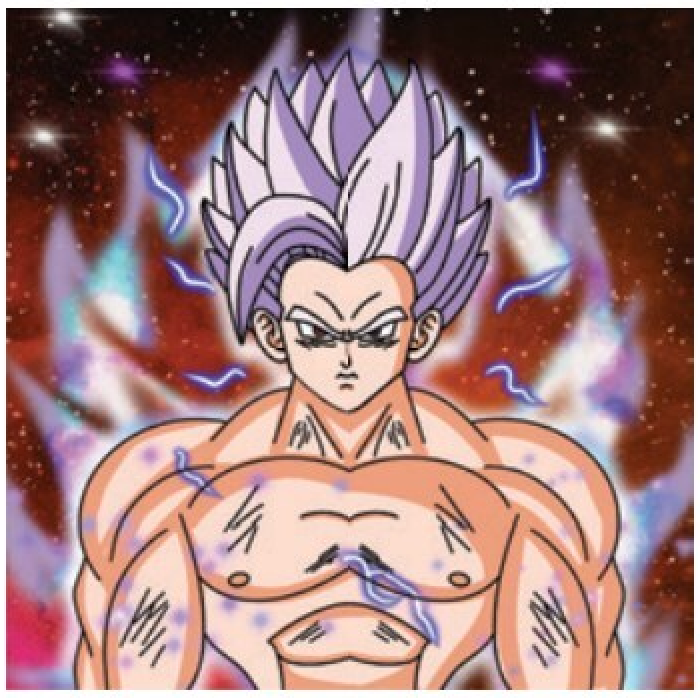
My favorite system of all time is the GameCube. It was my first system, so there's a lot of nostalgia surrounding it, but I think many games have a unique art style that helps them stay unique. **– Logan**

It's Steam, hands-down: It has the most extensive backward-compatibility library and options to stream locally to mobile devices or play on the Steam Deck. Also, no other digital storefront lets you hide games (or entire genres) that you don't want to play or have already played on another platform. No other platform incorporates Metacritic scores on the store page. Valve's dedication to NOT wasting my time is why it is the best. **– ThenThomWasLike**

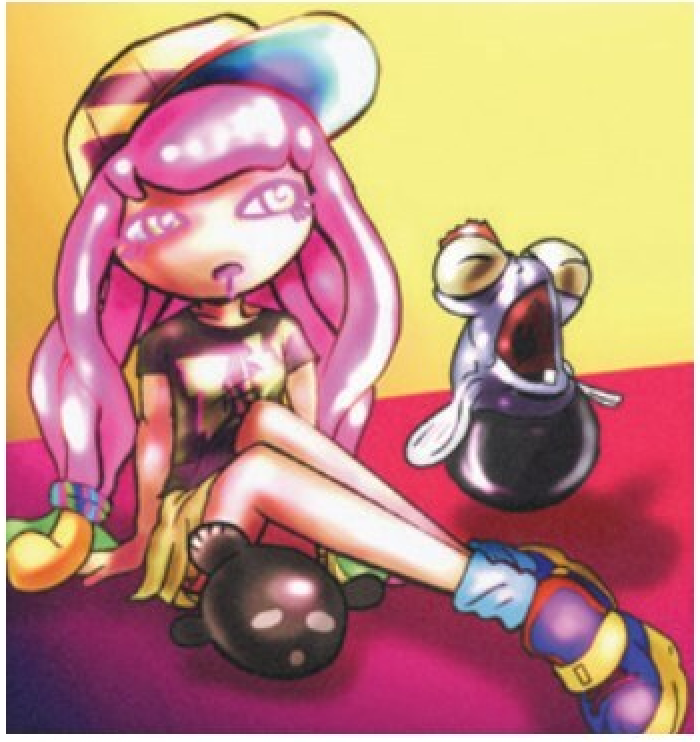
KIDS AND CARD GAMES

I was reading through [issue] 343 and remembered the fantastic article about teaching kids how to play games. My question is about getting kids into trading card games, such as the Pokémon TCG. Any tips for getting kids into them? I would love to see a full article on this. **– James via email**

↳ ***As with most activities with kids, our top recommendation is to be guided by their enthusiasm and interests. Is your kiddo interested in games, cards, and collecting? If so, what are some of the things they like? If cute monsters are big for them, you're right to have your eye on Pokémon. Are they more into traditional fantasy trappings and video games? A digital TCG like Hearthstone could be a big hit. Once you zero in on something they're excited about, let them guide an initial level of engagement; it's great to express your own enthusiasm, as that can be infectious. But don't push your own interests and presume theirs will be the same. Most of the time, kids are going to appreciate any opportunity to do something with a grown-up they love and trust. Lean into games and shared projects that you both enjoy, and it's hard to go wrong.***



Reader art submission: Mario Morales



Reader art submission: Marvin LiTrenta

Reader art submission: Thomas Reid, age 15

FEWER EXCLUSIVES

Xbox's Phil Spencer said we should expect fewer exclusive games on systems like Xbox and PlayStation. Over the last few years, Microsoft has purchased over a dozen game development studios to create games for the Xbox brand. Isn't this a way of generating more exclusive games? In my eyes, Microsoft's goal with Game Pass is to create the Netflix of gaming, offering experiences people can't get anywhere else within an affordable subscription. Putting these games on Xbox and Switch makes that subscription less appealing. I don't understand what Microsoft is trying to do.

– Autumn Newburn, Fresno, CA

↳ *Creators want to get games into the hands of as many people as possible, making them available for all popular devices. The primary reason to play these games on Xbox is for the value Game Pass offers. If an Xbox title launches on other systems, you will likely pay full price for it, whereas on Xbox, you don't pay anything above your subscription price. With all the developers Xbox has acquired, the cadence of games hitting the service should increase in the years ahead, making it an even greater value than it is today. The need to get an Xbox or PC would diminish if Game Pass were made available on PlayStation or Switch, but we don't see that happening. Regarding PlayStation, Sony is just getting rolling on PC support. We suspect that will increase over time, perhaps even making some of the company's big triple-A releases available on PC on the same day as PlayStation 5.* ■

PETS 4 ROBOTS
STRAY
CAT FOODS
OFFLINE
Rich 22

Reader art winner: Richie Emeruwa

↘

Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!

Please include your name and email address. Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media, and become the property of *Game Informer*. Email to: ReaderArt@GameInformer.com

Seeing Crystal-Clear Worlds

PlayStation VR2 delivers breathtaking clarity and a riveting next-gen experience, but does it have the games to make you want it?

BY ANDREW REINER

I let out an audible "wow" just minutes after starting Resident Evil Village on PlayStation VR2. A blood-curdling scream deep within Castle Dimitrescu doesn't put me on edge as my attention is elsewhere. I'm looking at a framed painting on a foyer wall. This portrait of a regal-looking man is rather ordinary, but in PSVR2, it holds my attention because I can see the little details in crystal-clear clarity. I study the brush strokes, the color variations in his coat's fabric, and I can tell it's an oil painting.

When I played the original version of Resident Evil Village on PlayStation 5, I didn't pay too much attention to the environmental details, like this painting. In this playthrough, I am frequently distracted by them. Even though this version is essentially the same game, it takes on new life through PSVR2's stunning display.

The headset's OLED display delivers a wide 110-degree field of view capable of presenting games in vivid 4K HDR. Unlike most VR headsets on the market, I'm not seeing any general pixelization, artifacting, or graininess in the text – everything looks sharp. The display resolution is 2000x2040 per eye, and the games can run at smooth framerates of 90/120Hz. This is one of the nicest screens out there, rivaling HTC Vive 2's 2448 x 2448 per eye resolution. That headset retails for roughly $799. We still don't know what price the PSVR2 will go for, but my time with this impressive hardware makes me think it will be expensive; every aspect of the PSVR2 feels genuinely high-end.

In the day I spent with this headset, I checked out four games: The Walking Dead: Saints & Sinners – Chapter 2: Retribution, Resident Evil Village, Star Wars: Tales from Galaxy's Edge – Enhanced Edition, and most impressively, Horizon: Call of the Mountain.

All these games embrace the power and clarity of the headset, as well as the enhanced functionality of the controllers, such as the adaptive triggers, haptic feedback, finger touch sensitivity, and general motion tracking. But only Horizon is designed exclusively for the PlayStation VR2. The other games are either already out on other VR headsets or will soon release on them. Looking at the software lineup, are Horizon and enhanced editions of existing games enough to make you want the hardware? That's a particularly loaded question to ask people who already have a VR headset.

The Setup

The painful days of setting up PlayStation 4's VR headset are behind us. PlayStation VR2 consists of just one cable, you don't need a camera or Move controllers, and the passthrough camera allows you to see your surroundings while adjusting your setup.

The PSVR2 headset is light, comfortable, and easy to adjust. A couple of game developers at the event said the headset has an "airy" design. That's a great way of summarizing how it feels on your head. It isn't suffocating or too snug and just kind of hangs comfortably in front of your eyes. The dial on the back of the headset is also a nice way of tightening the fit – a moment I rather enjoyed, given how loudly the dial clicks as the strap tightens.

When you boot the headset up, you have the option to personalize the specifics of the VR experience, including the visibility fields and eye tracking. Through the PlayStation VR2 control center, you can enter menus that provide accurate readings on where your eyes are and how you are viewing things.

These menus play out like minigames, such as having your eyes follow moving red dots without swiveling your head. Another menu shows colored rings around your eyes. If the rings turn blue, the lenses are aligned. Eye reading matters, as the headset can track what you are looking at. That's right: characters will know if you are making eye contact with them! The eye reading also helps on the backend with advanced foveated rendering techniques used to enhance the visuals by adjusting resolutions based on what you are looking at.

As strange as this sounds, the best part of the setup is defining your play area. This process draws heavy inspiration from Meta's Quest headsets. With the headset's embedded camera active, you get a quick look at your surroundings. A wild, science-fiction-like mesh covers everything near you, doing its best to read the lay of your room. You need to look at the floor and even up at the ceiling to get a complete readout. After the scan is complete, the headset recommends a play area. Using your controller almost like a laser pointer, you can alter the recommended shape to your liking, all with the simplicity of drawing in the air. It's a wonderfully simple process, and the results should keep people from punching walls or knocking over things in their rooms. If you approach the edge of your grid, red warning rings appear, cautioning you to back up.

As freeing as this VR setup is, you always have to remember it's tethered to your PlayStation 5 through a cable. You'll feel it hanging around your body as you move, and will also step on it. The cable has some length and wasn't too much of a bother in my time with PSVR2, but I did notice it often as I got into the games, as it draped in front of my arms, or I could feel it on my back.

After getting comfortable with the headset, I dove into the games. Launching them is just as simple as booting up a game from the PlayStation 5 crossbar.

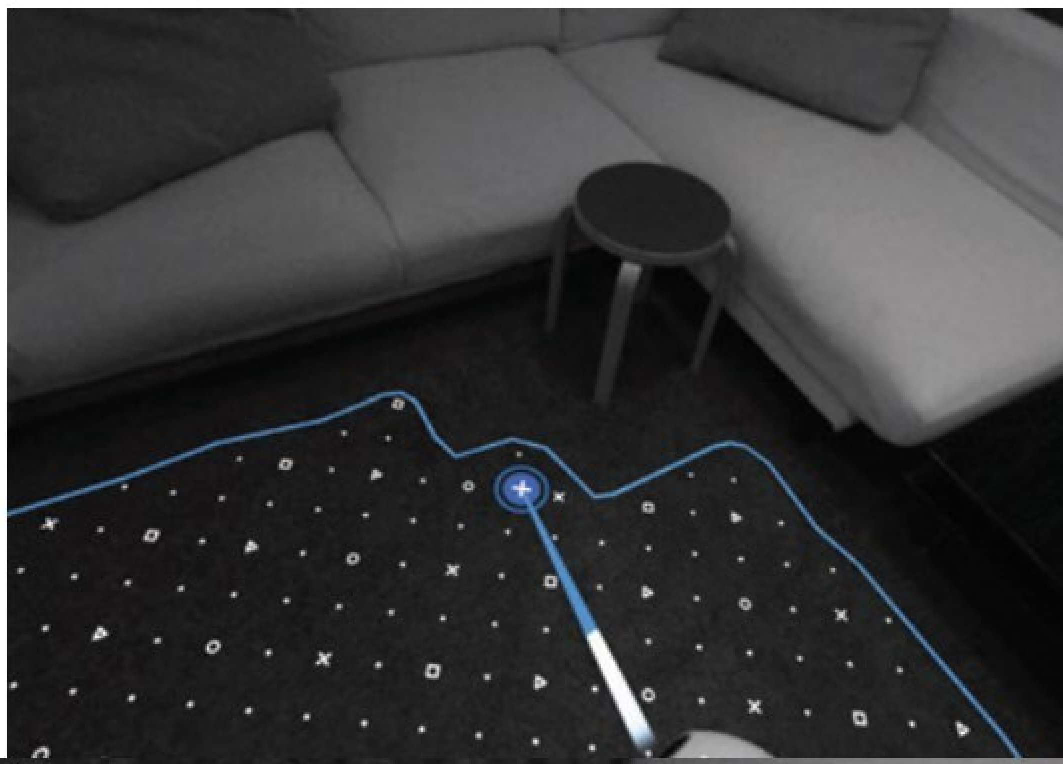
Horizon: Call of the Mountain

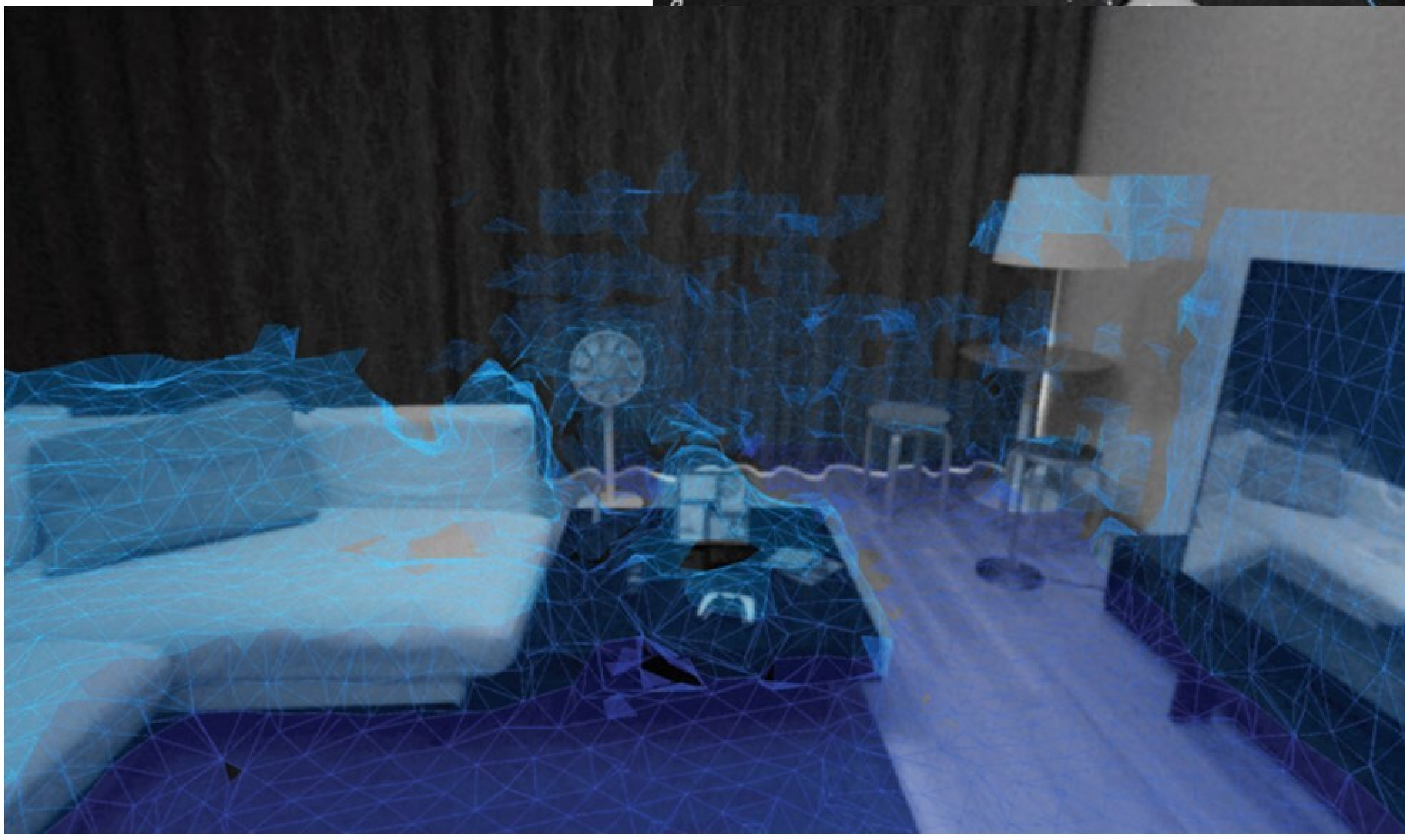
This game is the next-generation showpiece you want to see at launch. We don't yet know if Horizon or any of the games mentioned in this article will be available on the same day as the hardware in early 2023, but the safe money is on at least Horizon being there, if not all of them.

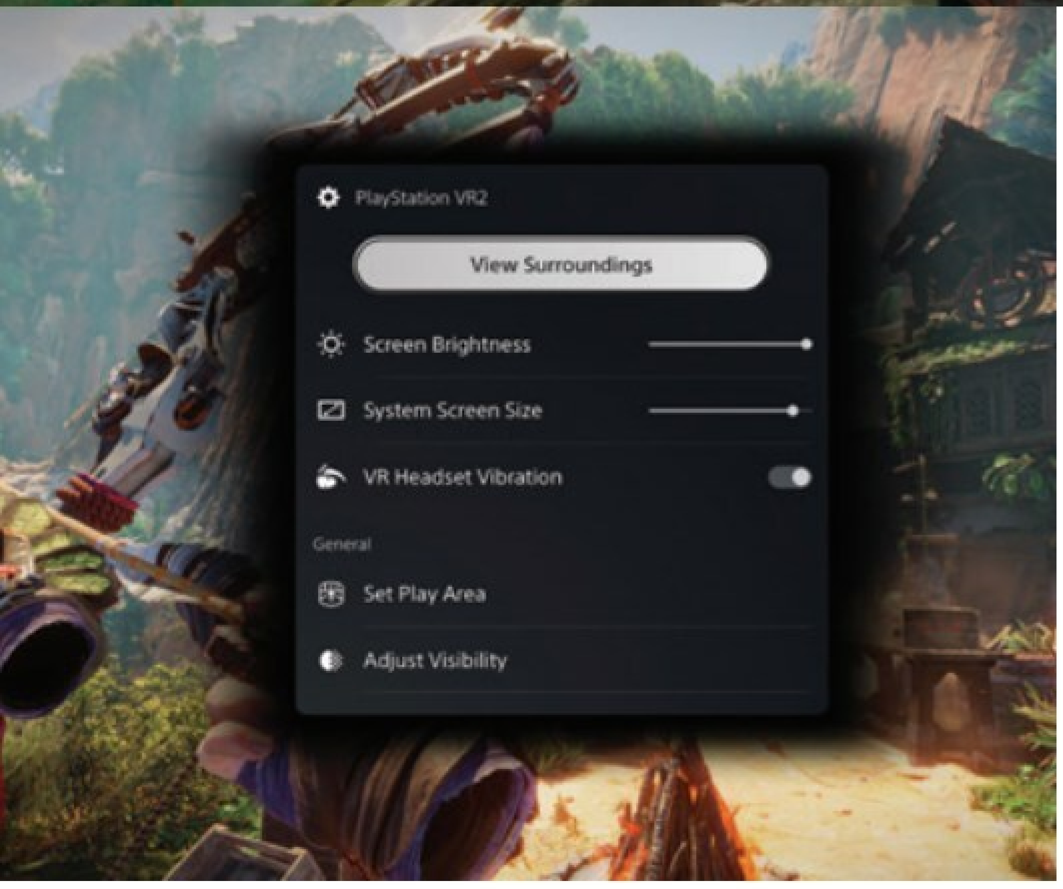
In my Horizon: Call of the Mountain demo, what I quickly learned is this experience is every bit the graphical juggernaut as Horizon: Forbidden West, and it gains a little more oomph in its visuals, thanks to VR giving us an accurate read on the scale of the robotic dinosaurs. If you thought the Tallnecks were huge in the console games, just wait until you see one lumber right in front of you in VR. The sheer size of one of their feet is far beyond what you thought it was. After I saw one in VR, I asked the Guerrilla Games representatives in attendance if the Tallneck size increased in Call of the Mountain. They said it was one-to-one and that it just looked larger given the new perspective. The VR viewpoint and the feeling of presence amplify its proportions. It's a wild thing to see, and it will only make sense once you view it with your own eyes.

The Horizon demo starts slowly with the player on a rowboat going upstream. This moment helps establish the story, and lets you get to know your character Ryas, a disgraced former Carja soldier who first appeared in a Horizon comic book series. Ryas is talking with two other people who are commanding the boat. You are there as their prisoner. They are moving slowly given the amount of wildlife bounding about.

As the plot develops, the ride almost takes on a Disneyland-like vibe as a variety of robotic beasts emerge from lush treelines and soar over mountains. They get dangerously close, and each carries a different







kind of awe in the way they move and how large they are. The visual clarity and detail in each machine look amazing. Within just a few minutes of playing and sitting on this boat, I felt like I was on a greatest hits tour of the dinosaurs from Horizon Zero Dawn. It's an awesome way to start the game, even if you don't do much. The animations and lighting are breathtaking, and I just wanted to reach out to grab onto the robots. The most interaction I have in the opening minute, however, is holding up a hand to move a vine hanging in front of us as we enter a cave. It's a small interactive moment, but a cool one nonetheless.

When Ryas finally gets onto dryland, I don't know what to do. The analog sticks won't move him, and I can't click on the environment to warp to specific spots (something many games do in VR). The game informs me that I need to raise and lower my hands like I'm running. Sure enough, making this motion makes Ryas move as quickly as I'm pumping. These are the kinds of motions I hate doing when anyone else is watching me play VR. I felt like an idiot doing it in front of game developers and PlayStation representatives.

As I chug along like someone jogging in place, turning my head steers Ryas in the direction I look. I could also use the left analog stick to change his direction, but I found using my head to be the best approach. He eventually comes across a rock wall that he will need to ascend. White markings highlight the ledges he can grab onto. As you would expect, all I have to do is reach out my arm, make sure my hand is hovering over the rock, and then pull the trigger on the controller to latch on to it. My first few grips were made slowly and with perfect calculation, but I soon learned I could motor up the wall quickly. I could feel the motion as I moved. The developers in the room warned me that I can fall if my aim isn't true.

The climbing mechanic works well and offers plenty of variety in rock designs, including ledges requiring hand-over-hand motions. Most of the action in this demo consisted of ascents up towering structures that give a fantastic sense of height (and fright) should I look down.

I also got to take on a Watcher, Horizon's version of a raptor. This agile beast isn't as aggressive as we've come to know in the console games, but it does rattle off fireballs and periodically lunge at Ryas with a tail swipe. Ryas dodges attacks by pressing a button and motioning to the desired side. His weapon of choice is the same as Aloy's: a bow.

Always one of the best examples of player input in VR, the bow in Call of the Mountain is a blast to use. I reach over my shoulder to pull an arrow from my quiver, quickly place it on the bow, click a shoulder button to hold it in place, and then pull my arm back to tighten the string. Letting go of the shoulder button sends the arrow flying at the Watcher. My aim isn't great out of the gates, and I feel like my settings are off. Guerrilla's reps recommend I switch the option from right to left-handed (handled in a menu), and that does the trick. I'm slinging arrows like a champ, and the Watcher's health depletes quickly.

Outside of the action, I find the world of Call of the Mountain to be highly interactive. I pick up an apple, hold it to my face to eat it, and regain strength. I also pick up other items to examine. Their physics are impressive, allowing me to put a crate on the floor and then carefully place the lid on top of it.

Horizon: Call of the Wild is a visual feast that blends extravagant details with vibrant colors. It's a fun game to look at, and my short time with it also delivered plenty of excitement. The Horizon world is handled with care, reminding me why I love the console games. The combat and action are something new, however, and we'll have to wait to see if they live up to the game's hallowed name.

Resident Evil Village

I already talked about how Resident Evil Village's little details impress. They are a constant throughout the short demo. As you would expect, Lady Dimitrescu looks gigantic in the VR world, and seeing her suck blood from your hand creates a new level of creepiness through the headset. The swarms of bugs that her minions summon also are more of a visual nuisance and up the tension.

Ethan still takes a beating just like he did in the console version, yet he can now dual-wield weapons, but that doesn't mean he'll have an easier time combating them. In my play session, I place a knife in his left hand and a pistol in his right. I can freely use both as I please but will have to holster the blade when I need to reload. This action isn't just a click of a button. You must free the clip from the pistol, grab a fresh one from your side, insert it, and then cock the gun. These actions take a bit of precision yet deliver satisfying haptic feedback in the controllers. It also slows Ethan down, leaving him vulnerable.

The physics in the game are quite good. When no enemies were nearby, I tossed my knife high into the air and was able to catch it on its descent. My demo didn't have any puzzles (although they will be in the final game), so I had to make up some of my own excitement as I moved deeper into Dimitrescu's lair.

When enemies did crawl out of the woodwork, I found the gunplay to be excellent, delivering a nice pop in the feel, and I experienced the panic of running low on ammo, and the scramble to reload as quickly as possible.

Resident Evil Village is another excellent demonstration of PlayStation VR2's next-gen screen quality and controller input. With some big pieces of the game missing in the demo, it's hard to say how the gameplay will flow in the final product. No matter what, though, it's wild seeing Lady Dimitrescu in VR. That isn't enough of a selling point, especially for people that already played the game on console, but it is one of those moments that people will likely rave about.

The Walking Dead: Saints & Sinners – Chapter 2: Retribution

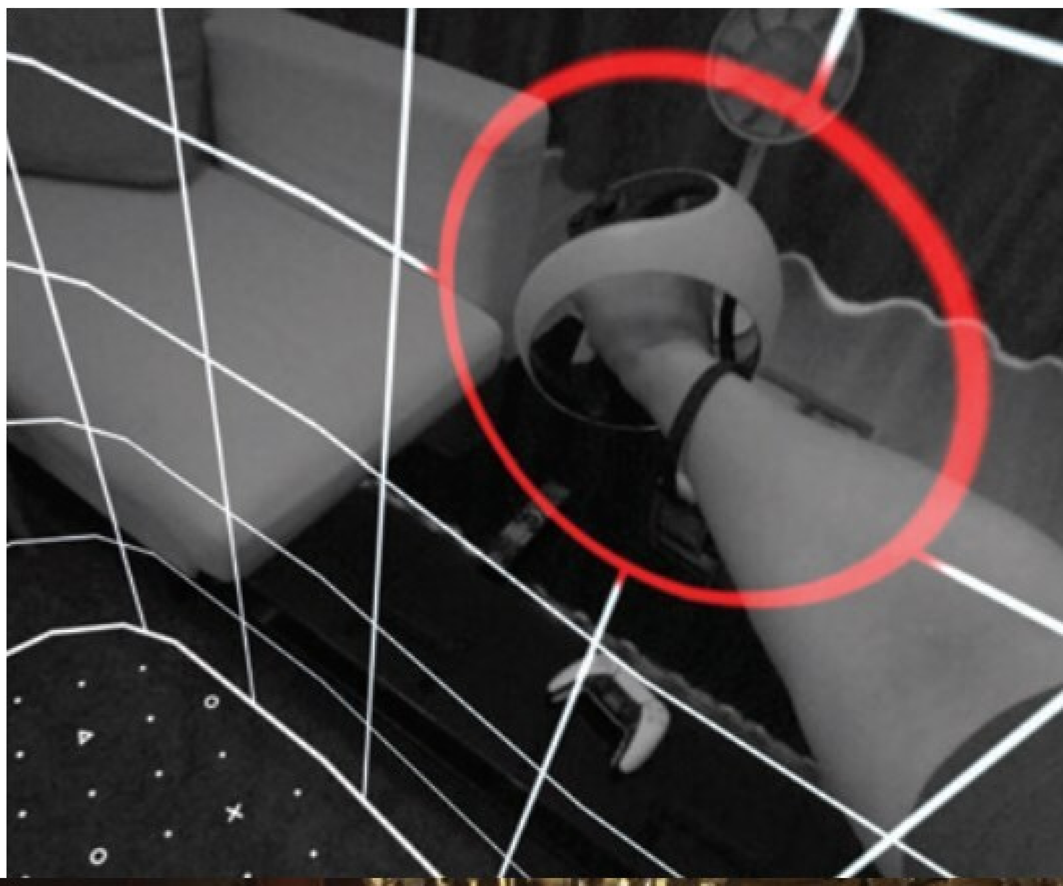
I don't know how many zombies I grabbed to hold back from biting me, but most of them received a swift machete to the skull. Retribution was the most complete game I played on PlayStation VR2, and it required plenty of trial and error, given how many different controller actions are in the game. It's a VR title that embraces most aspects of the medium and impresses in that capacity.

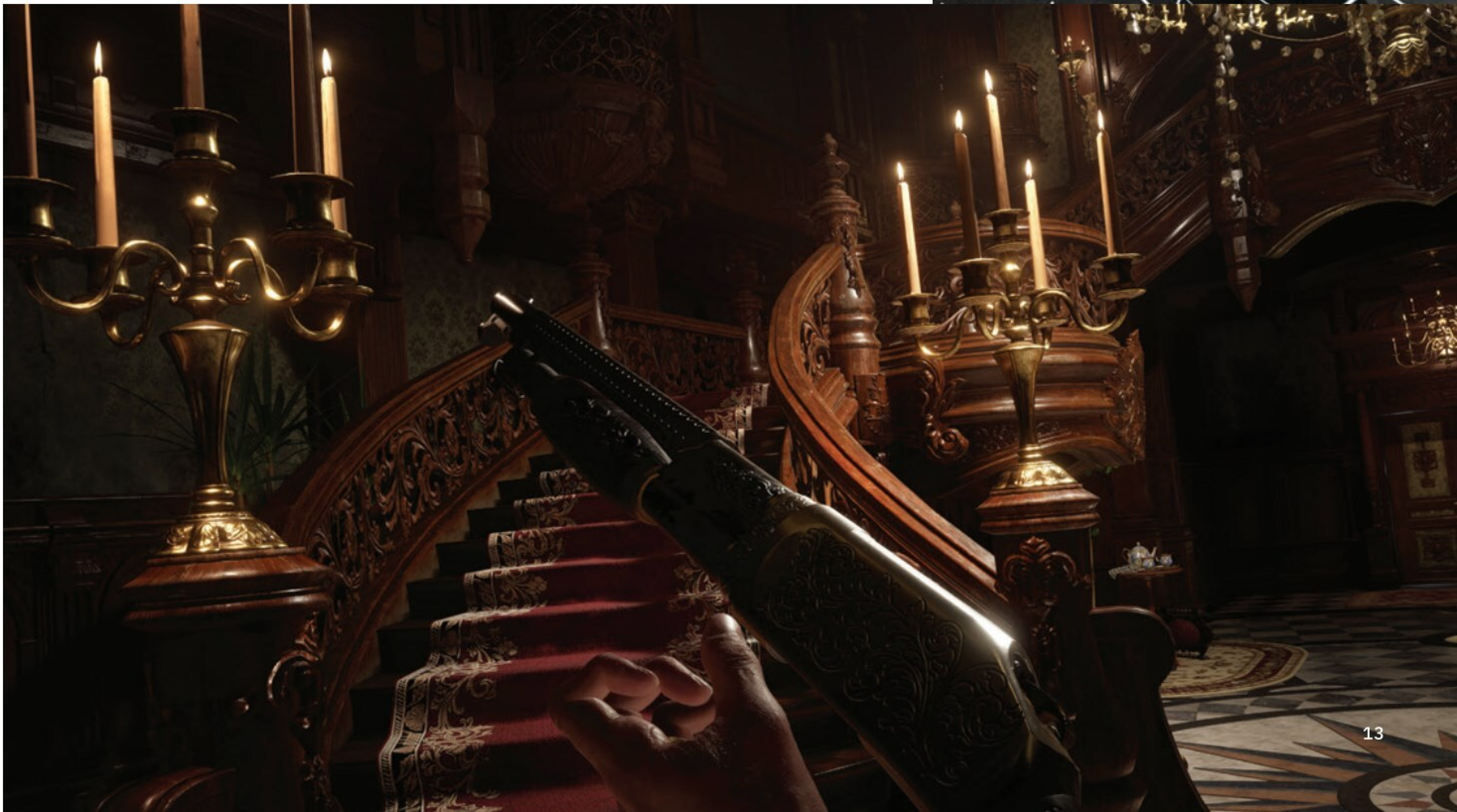
Whether I was furiously shaking my flashlight to regain light in a darkened backroom or frantically trying to reload a gun, Retribution kept me on my toes. It delivered a nice slice of zombie action and a sliver of narrative player choice. The big finale in my demo took place in a bar that was blasting music. Zombies poured in from every direction, even dropping from higher floors on top of me. I would have been a goner, but thankfully was gifted with a chainsaw that cuts through them like a hot knife in butter. This weapon has a satisfying rattle in the PlayStation controllers. All weapons I used delivered different haptics output, much like in Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart on PlayStation 5.

Retribution's visuals didn't wow me like Resident Evil and Horizon and seemed close to what the first chapter looks like on other VR headsets. Regardless, the action and storytelling hooked me. For people just jumping into Saints & Sinners for the first time, starting with Chapter 2 seems like the wrong way to go about it. I asked the Skydance Interactive team in attendance if the first chapter was also on the way and received a smile, but no definitive answer.

Star Wars: Tales from Galaxy's Edge – Enhanced Edition

As much as I love Star Wars, returning to Galaxy's Edge on PlayStation VR2 didn't do much for me. The reason: The demo didn't show much. I experienced a brief conversation in the cantina and one firefight out in the wild. The demo mostly shows how much the visuals are enhanced, giving a good look at the more realistic lighting and sharper texture quality. The 3D audio through the PlayStation VR headphones also delivers a great sense of spatial awareness, allowing me to pick up threats in the battle. The audio of a door suddenly opening also made me turn around while talking to someone in the cantina to see who was coming in. The headset feels fantastic and again makes me wonder how much a full PSVR2 setup will cost. ■





CRAFTING A MARVEL

Our first glimpse at Amy Hennig's Captain America and Black Panther team-up

BY ANDREW REINER

In the world of Marvel Comics, the word "ensemble" invokes thoughts of the Avengers, X-Men, or Fantastic Four. We learned Skydance New Media and Marvel Entertainment were working on an ensemble Marvel video game a few weeks ago. The internet's rumor mill believed this game would focus on Reed Richards and his fantastic family. During a Disney & Marvel Games Showcase at this year's D23, we learned it wasn't Fantastic Four, Avengers, or any Marvel team. Skydance is creating its own squad of four heroes, set against the backdrop of World War II.

The timeframe has Captain America front and center fighting against Hydra and Nazi troops. Through a narrative twist, Wakanda gets involved, and players gain control of Black Panther, but not the one you know. This Black Panther is Azzuri, T-Challa's grandfather. If you think that's a deep cut into Marvel lore, the other two characters are even lesser known. From the Howling Commandos, players will suit up as Gabriel Jones, who plays a mean trumpet in the comics. The fourth character is Nanali, the leader of a new Wakandan spy network, who has only been in a few comics.

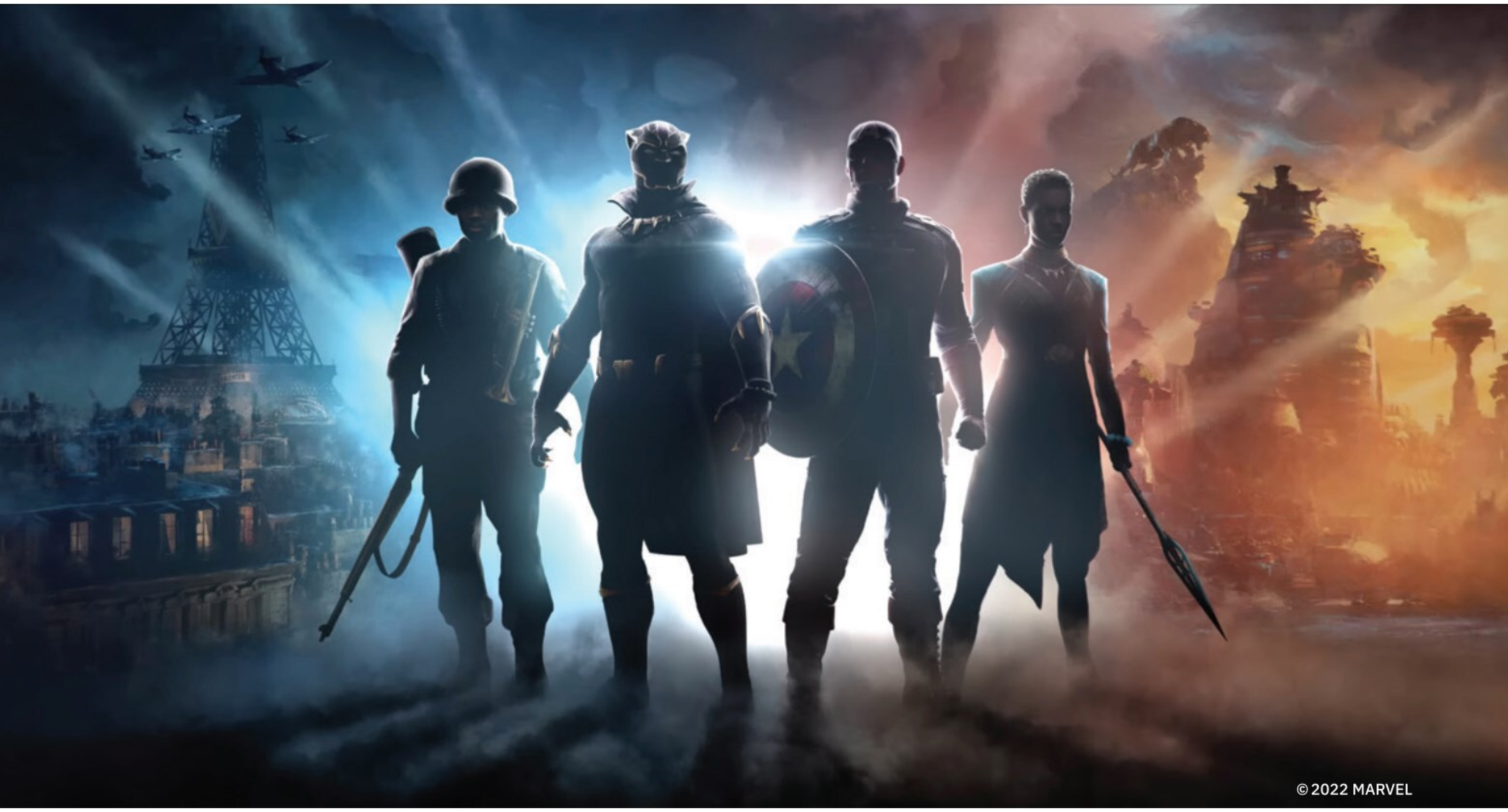
AMY HENNIG

President of Skydance New Media, Hennig has worked for such notable studios as Electronic Arts, Naughty Dog, and Crystal Dynamics. She is arguably best known as creative director and lead writer of the acclaimed Uncharted series

The most puzzling aspect of this game's reveal is the lack of a name. Following the announcement, I sat down with Amy Hennig, Skydance New Media's president, and Marc Bernardin, Skydance's story consultant. I asked them why they decided to announce a project without a name.

"Names take time," Hennig says with a smile. "We want to go through this process carefully and not rush it. We are telling an original story, so there is not a book or title or team we can immediately point to. Coming up with a title that lands like a Marvel title lands and is original is no small feat. And then you realize Marvel has been around for a long time, and they have used every single word you might think of. We took ourselves off the hook for that and focused on the tagline."

Four heroes. Two worlds. One war.



© 2022 MARVEL

© 2022 MARVEL

© 2022 MARVEL

↙ The reveal trailer gives us looks at the streets of Paris and a safehouse with items like brochures, notebooks, a gun, a document folder, and a Hydra commander's hat scattered on the table. The camera then pans up to show Captain America's iconic shield with scratch marks. The trailer ends on a shot of Black Panther emerging from the shadows toward Captain America before snapping into a fighting stance

Skydance's focus is to make this superhero experience as widely accessible as possible, hoping that anyone can play it from start to finish. When asked about inspiration points for this odd ensemble, Hennig cited films with men on a mission, such as *Dirty Dozen*. "Marvel characters in that time period felt immediately appealing," she adds. "We love the idea of exploring the Black Panther of that era. What was Wakanda of the 1940s when they were hidden away from the world? How would they react to these World Wars on their borders and continent? And the debate of whether they can remain neutral and sit on the sidelines when the entire world is at war."

Bernardin also says that we'll see different sides of Steve Rogers, who is just learning to be a leader. "We haven't seen who Steve Rogers is in the bulk of World War II. The comics dipped into that territory a bit, but we haven't seen that onscreen. What makes them heroes? And how do we comprise that and continue kicking them in the shins and force them into places they don't want to be operating from."

The other two characters, Jones and Nanali, give players a non-superhero perspective into the two worlds. All four characters are playable at specific points in the story. Hennig clarified that the game will be a linear single-player experience. "That's why the Uncharted shorthand is helpful," she says. That means a chapter-based structure with cinematics. It won't be designed exactly like the Uncharted games. The game is a unique experience with four wildly different viewpoints.

When asked if this Marvel story would give us different takes on the heroes like Insomniac's Spider-Man games, Hennig said they are pulling from all existing Marvel lore. "We want it to feel true to all of it, but not adhere to a specific one," she says. "We haven't gotten the chance to get to know Steve Rogers as a young man, freshly transformed and freshly in uniform."

"Whenever we have seen Steve Rogers at this point, he's been pure of heart," Bernardin adds. "He's a knight on a steed, but we didn't get the sense that he went through officer training school. Nobody taught him how to be a leader. He has natural gifts, but there's a learning process. How does he build a team? We're finding ways to push him."

Hennig and Bernardin didn't say much about Azzuri but did say he's older than the T'Challa comic and movie readers know.

"I'm excited about this studio," Hennig says. "I'm excited about the game. We're building on our experiences of telling action-packed cinematic adventures. We're changing things within the mechanics and controls that will feel fresh for long-time players and welcoming to people who have always wanted to pick up a controller but may have felt intimidated that a game wasn't for them. We're trying to crack that problem of creating a game where you feel like you are embodying these characters and choreographing the experience from moment to moment, instead of feeling like a logistical, tactical game that you have to beat. We are looking at games that make you feel like you are entering an experiential flow state instead of managing skill trees. People who have played it have said they've lost themselves in our experience because the game was doing what they intended instead of fighting them." ■

P5R
PERSONA 5 THE ROYAL

Super Bomberman R 2
KONAMI
いま、新たなる脅威が迫る

TOKYO GAME SHOW MAKES A TEPID COMEBACK

We visited Japan's premier gaming convention to take in the sights, sounds, and games, but left mostly underwhelmed **BY MARCUS STEWART**

BANDAI NAMCO
Park BEYOND

WHO
AM
I
?
KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS

TOKYO GAME SHOW MOSTLY RETURNED TO FORM after a pandemic-induced hiatus, attracting flocks of developers, press, and fans to the Makuhari Messe convention center. Wandering the three halls containing the event, it was tough to deny the comforting familiarity of roaming a traditional convention in a time where in-person events have become dicey propositions. But it was also impossible to ignore how muted it all felt.

Some would argue TGS was declining long before the pandemic, and in its defense, the 2022 edition served as a hybrid event with many announcements breaking online. Plus, studios are still readjusting to the idea of traveling again to events to show off upcoming games, especially when many companies have reaped the benefits of promoting titles through video presentations and livestreams. Neither Nintendo, Sony, nor Microsoft had a presence at TGS, making it feel smaller and inconsequential as a result.

That doesn't mean the event had nothing of note. Third-party publishers such as Square Enix, Capcom, Sega, Konami, and Bandai Namco brought their shares of highly-anticipated titles. It was nice to take games such as Forspoken, Like a Dragon: Ishin!, Street Fighter 6, and Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII Reunion for a spin. The event also had a surprisingly substantial indie presence. Not all of these games landed, but it's always valuable to get a hands-on impression of how a project is shaping up.

But this is TGS, so many titles were aimed at the Japanese market and aren't likely to come stateside anytime soon, if ever. Most of the floor was also dedicated to various merchandise booths, NFT and blockchain ventures, and other miscellaneous gaming-adjacent offerings. This felt like filling floor space due to the lack of a larger developer presence, and we saw everything worth looking at in just a couple of hours of the four-day event. Tokyo Game Show had its moments, but its return felt like it was shaking off the cobwebs. In a time when conventions feel less essential for promoting games, it also felt a bit outdated, making us wonder what needs to change for the show to make a larger splash next year. ■

THQ NORDIC
COSMIC SHAKE

WHAT IS ROCKSMITH+?

After a roughly eight-year hiatus, Ubisoft recently released Rocksmith+ to wanna-be musicians eager to fulfill that lifelong dream of playing guitar and bass. But what exactly is Rocksmith+, and is it a good fit for you? We played several hours and spoke to its developers to get some answers **BY MATT MILLER**

Is it a game?
Not really. While previous iterations of Rocksmith flirted with being a proper game, Rocksmith+ is positioned entirely as a way to learn guitar. "I think we would describe it as a new music education platform with gamified learning elements," says lead audio designer Brian Cody. You subscribe to the service and gain access to everything on offer. Certain elements lean into ideas like achievements and progression through your learning, but it's not a game in any traditional sense.

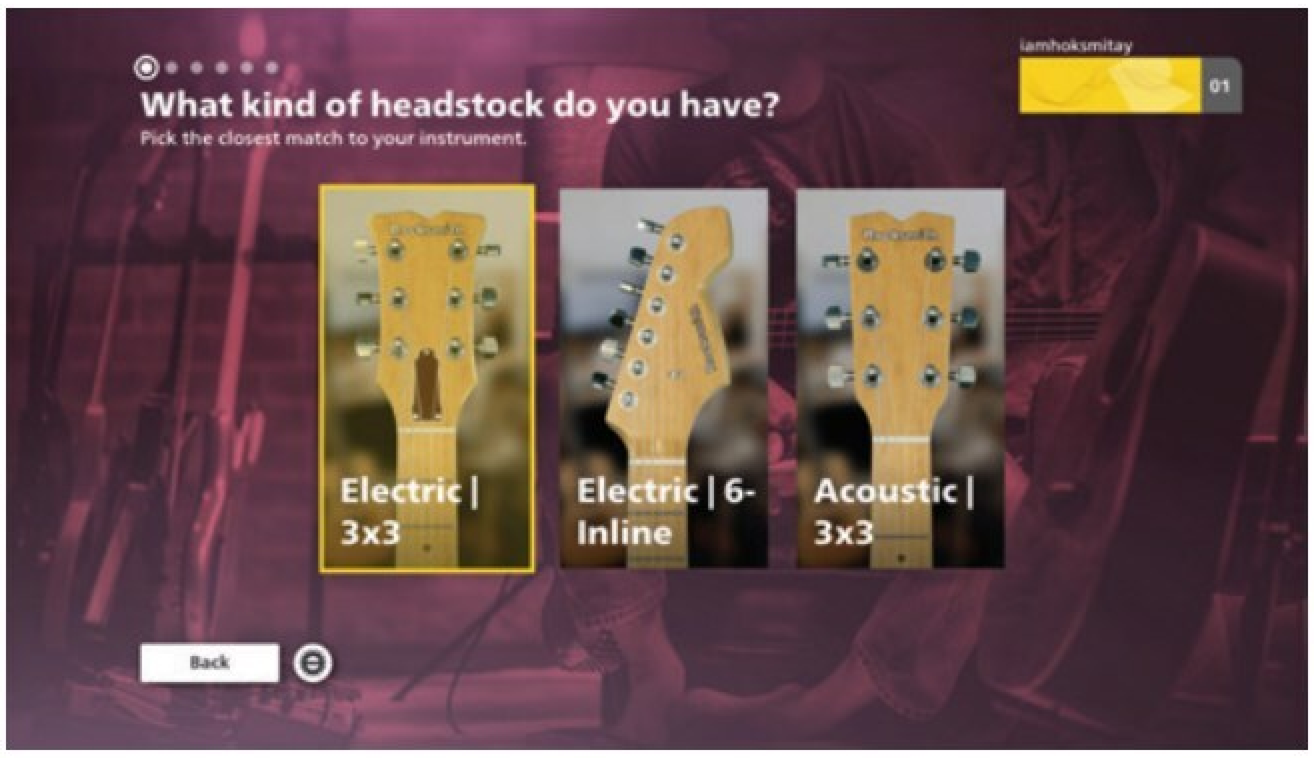
So, what's that going to cost me?
Three subscription tiers are on offer, but the only difference is how much access time you're paying for. Go monthly for $14.99, pay $39.99 for a three-month option, or devote yourself to becoming Jimi Hendrix for an annual $99.99 sub. If you go for the three-month option, you get one month free. Similarly, if you opt for the annual subscription, you receive three months for free.

So, I have to be online to use it?
Yep.

What's that subscription get me access to?
Quite a lot, based on my time playing. Rocksmith+ includes a library of 5,000 songs – or 8,000 in the United States. You also gain access to a thoughtfully curated approach to music education.

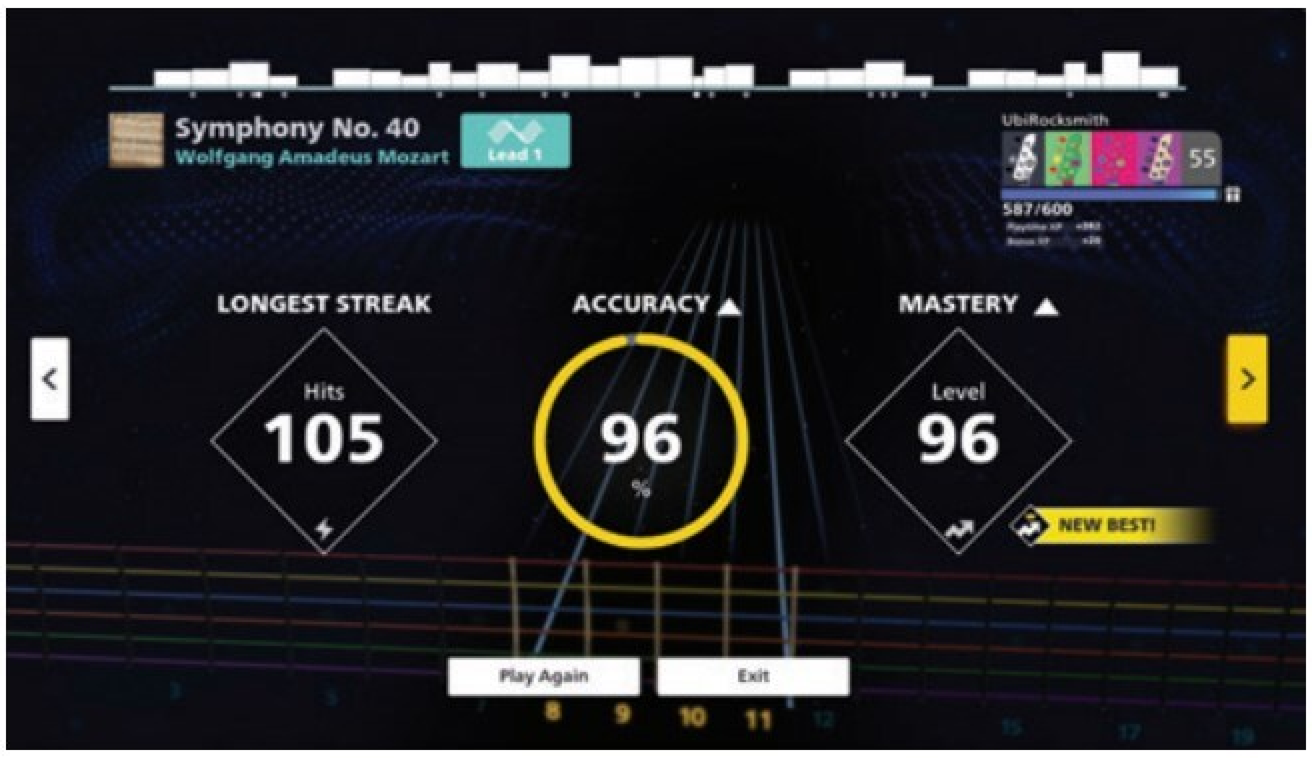
So, it's more than just the songs?
Yes, some of the best content included in the subscription are videos, music theory lessons, and even guides for better understanding your instrument and connected gear – like how to restring your guitar, for instance.

How does Rocksmith+ react to my playing?
Speaking as someone who once took guitar lessons, nothing beats the trained feedback of a real teacher. But Rocksmith+ has some pretty cool tricks up its sleeve. I found its



What kind of headstock do you have?

Pick the closest match to your instrument.



real-time adaptive difficulty especially impressive, gradually layering in new complexities even as I mastered a given riff or technique. After a song, besides the expected feedback on your accuracy, it offers handy practice recommendations based on your specific performance. Or guidance on specific chords that show up in the song you might have missed. The lessons learned in one song carry over when you switch to a new song; by tracking your subscription's progress, there's an even flow of learning as you hop between tracks.

How does it feel to play the songs?

I liked it, but getting used to the flow of notes took some time. There's a lot to keep track of, and I had to pay close attention during the early hours to grasp how and when to hit the notes until something eventually clicked, and I got it. One big change is the inclusion of tablature, one of the most common forms of musical notation for fretted instruments. If you have even a bit of guitar experience, you've likely seen this before, and it helps a lot. "It's about getting rid of those barriers to entry," Cody says. "And if you're somebody who's read TAB and is already familiar with that language, you can jump right in."

What instrument do I need?

Almost any guitar, acoustic or electric. Or a bass.

Do I need a pick-up on my instrument?

Remarkably, no. One of Rocksmith+'s coolest features is playing and getting real-time feedback without any connected cords if desired. Instead, you can download the Rocksmith+ app on your mobile device, which acts as a microphone that inputs your playing into the game. I found it surprisingly accurate and impressive during my time playing. The app doubles as an excellent guitar tuner, incidentally. "We really wanted to invite in acoustic players who didn't really have such an easy way to connect and use the game in the past," says Cody.

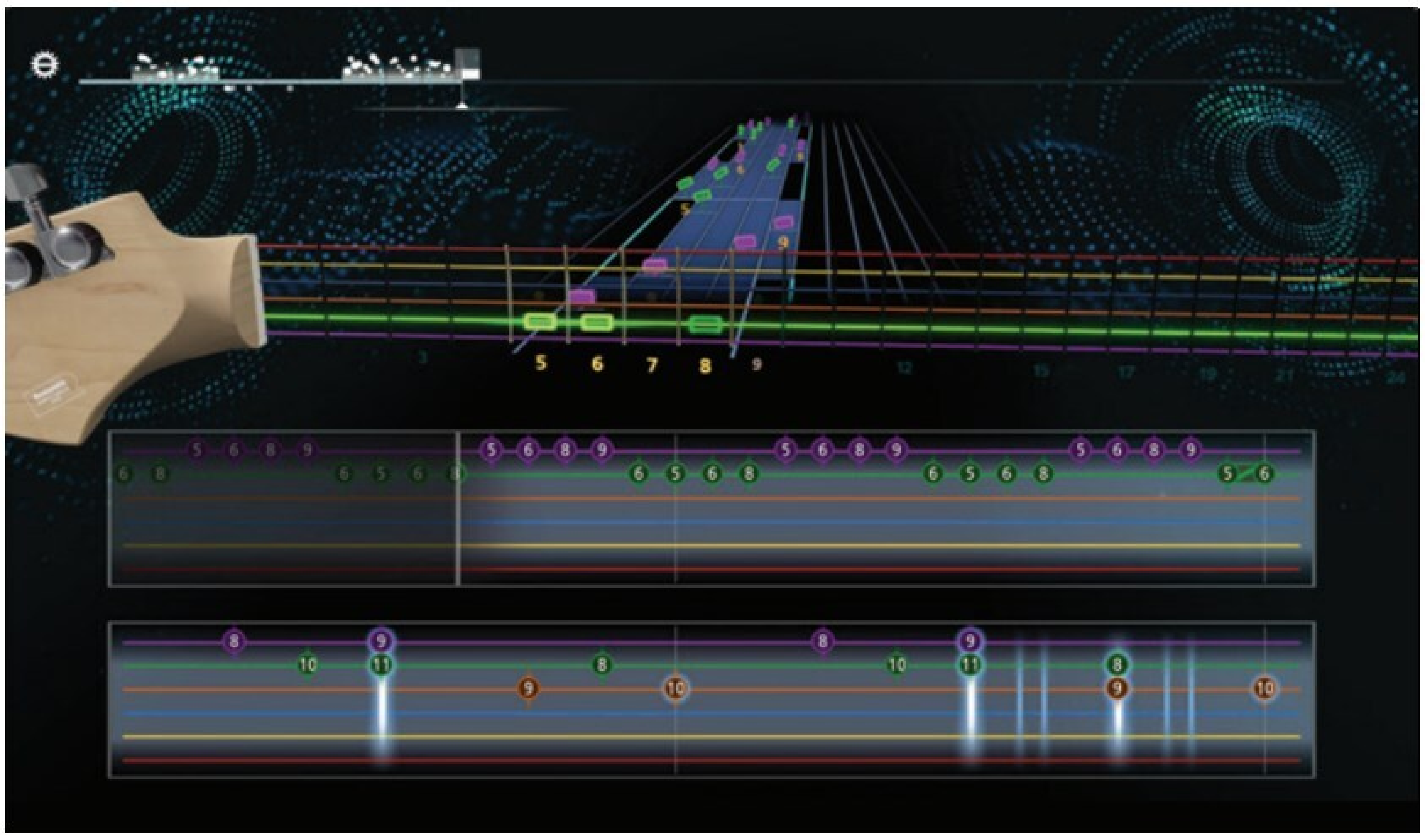
You can still use Ubisoft's real tone cable, and there are advantages to doing so. "The main difference that you'll have between plugging in with a cable and using the phone app is, if you're plugged in with a cable, you get the whole tone modeling side of Rocksmith," Cody says. "And if you're using the phone, we turn that all off." That's a loss because there are a lot of cool effects and ways to adjust the outputted sound. But it's questionable how much you'd want that, anyway, if you're playing on an acoustic.

What parts do I learn?

If you listen to much music, you know that many songs include more than one guitar track. Rocksmith+ lets you choose between multiple available tracks, including different lead guitar lines and rhythm parts. One addition I found especially fun was the availability of chord charts for simple play-along experiences. "These are stripped-down versions of the chord progressions of the songs," Gann says. "You can kind of think of these as campfire versions. And these are available for every single song in Rocksmith+."

Should I try it out?

If you have a guitar or bass sitting in the corner that you've always wanted to play, it's a pretty compelling package. Don't expect to master a song with the speed you used to nail rhythm patterns in Guitar Hero or Rock Band. This is actual guitar playing, and any real progress will take a bit of time. But Rocksmith+ makes the learning process fun, varied, and customized – if sometimes a bit overwhelming in options. The single-month subscription is affordable and might be a good option if you want to see if the system works for you. ■



LAYING THE SMACKDOWN

The twisting multi-year journey to craft one short level in Neon White

BY BLAKE HESTER

AS OF WRITING, THE FASTEST RUNTHROUGH of Neon White's "Smackdown" level is 9.56 seconds, earned by player "earlobe" on September 6, 2022.

Standing in contrast is the work that went into it. According to designer and creative director Ben Esposito, the earliest iteration was in March 2019, more than three years before its release in June 2022. In that time, there were more than 50 different iterations. Sometimes changes were small. Other times they fundamentally altered the level. Every designer who worked on the game has touched Smackdown in some form. Nevertheless, load into it now; chances are all that labor is invisible to you. Before sitting down to write, I beat it in just 11 seconds.

Neon White is a game built around speedrunning. Levels are short. If you're playing as intended, you hardly notice your surroundings before moving on. But the only way that works effectively is if levels are meticulously designed to facilitate that movement; they have to be made so that it feels natural for the player to fly through them. Making a level you barely think twice about takes a lot of effort.

Largely, it works. We gave Neon White a 9.5, and our review mentioned the level and game design, saying it feels "effortless as if you've practiced for years, not just 15 to 20 minutes."

To understand how that effortlessness was achieved, we talked to Esposito, game/level designer, programmer Russell Honor, and senior level designer and environment artist Carter Piccollo, who walked us through the making of Smackdown from concept to completion.

MARCH 2019

Neon White is about speedrunning. But it wasn't always the case that every level emphasized that point.

As Esposito tells it, before Smackdown, a lot of levels were built around the idea of teaching specific mechanics. But when work on Smackdown started, it was the first time the team tackled the idea of repeatedly playing through an individual level, optimizing times, and discovering different paths and shortcuts. Of course, Neon White still teaches you its mechanics, but Smackdown caused the team to re-look at the game as a whole.

"This was specifically about exploring, 'What if we didn't teach you something new? What if it was about revisiting it over and over again,'" Esposito says. "And the things we ended up learning in levels like this created new ways of thinking about the rest of the game."

He pulls up the earliest version, running in the game engine Unity. It's a graybox, featuring the level geometry but without any art (see picture). While a few core ideas are the same as the shipped version – some enemy placements and level layout – there is one immediate flaw: ambiguity. It's not always clear what you need to do.

In this iteration, the level begins with a Godspeed card and an enemy standing to the right. It's telling the player to grab the card, which grants a dash forward, before killing the enemy, which then drops an Elevate card, giving a double jump. But as Piccollo points out, there's nothing on which to use that Elevate card. Neon White, he says, is all about using what you immediately have.

To cut ambiguity, they'll need to remove the Elevate card, telling the player instead they need to jump to the left (not double jump, mind you) and then dash forward through the next set of enemies. However, that dash also presents its own set of issues. Two enemies stand on opposite sides of a small gap, and by the time you reach them, you have two Godspeed cards. The enemies are placed so the player has to dash through both, but it's unclear if they must dash twice to kill them or if one will do the trick.

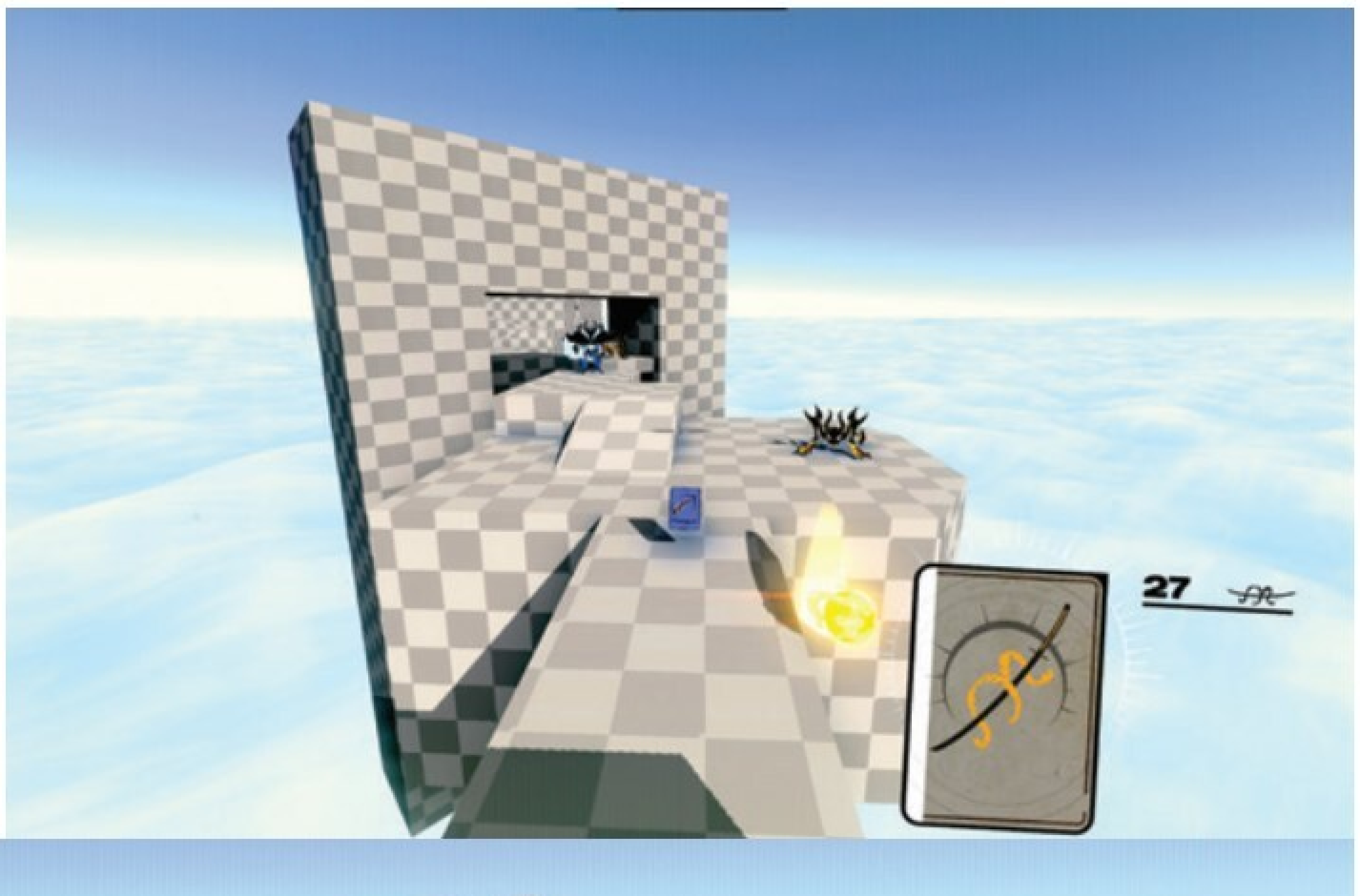
This issue is a core problem.

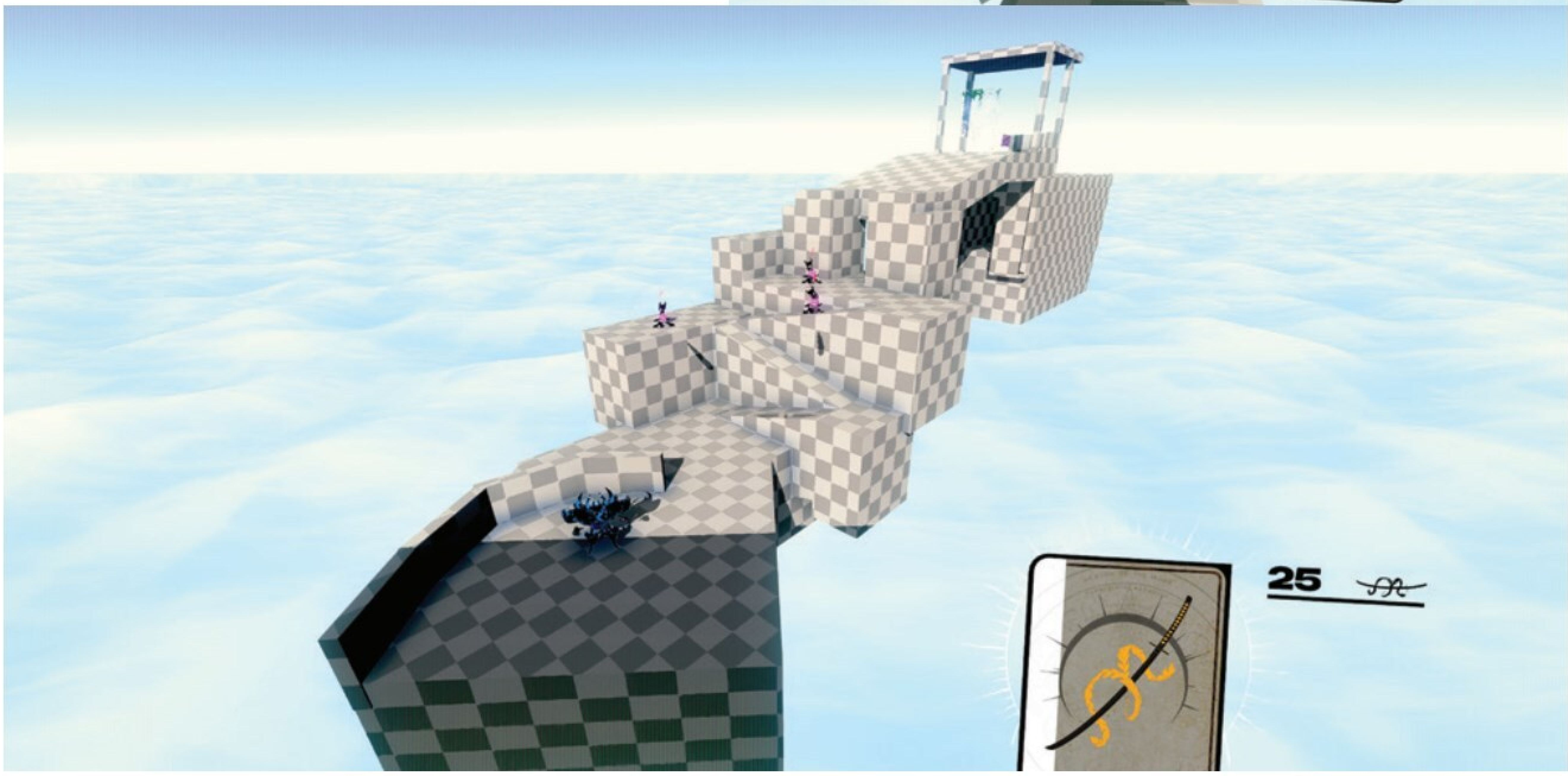
"If you're ever confused on what to do, the game doesn't feel good and it starts to fall apart," Piccollo says. "Your first time through needs to feel really clear. And the time where you're fully optimized also needs to feel really good, otherwise it feels like you're doing it wrong, even if it's faster."

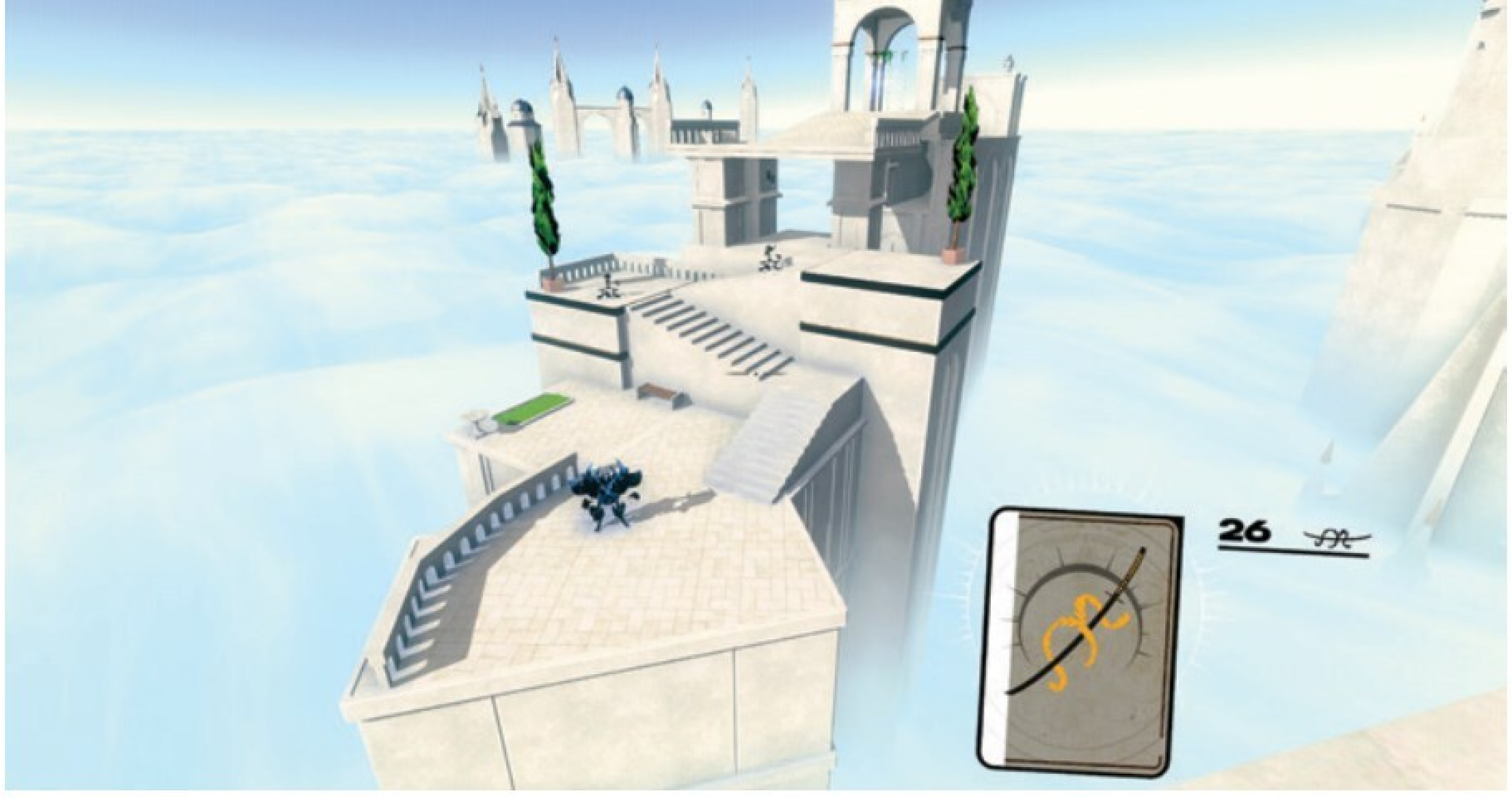
Removing ambiguity, Esposito says, was the main work of building levels. The less ambiguous, the more confident a player feels. The more confident, in this case, the more fun they have.

Honor and Esposito both point to a card placed in this early version. It's a Bomb card only used for shortcuts. Which in that specific context works, but ideally, the player won't know or see the shortcut on their first runthrough. It means this card is useless in the rest of the level. That undercuts the player's confidence.

"People would pick up the card and not understand what they were expected to do with it [and think they] missed something," Esposito says. "That was another rule that we had to establish; every card has to have an obvious purpose in the moment that you pick it up."







MAY 2020

We jump forward in time 14 months, seeing a later iteration from May 2020. The most noticeable change is all the art; it's beginning to look like Neon White.

There's now a straight runway at the beginning, funneling the player into the level. It features both a Godspeed and an Elevate card, though it's laid out in such a way that you can't see the latter behind the former. It's a problem that's addressed in later versions.

Issues from the first iteration also show up here -- the dash is still unclear, it's not immediately apparent what cards you should use, and as Esposito says, "there's a lot going on."

But the first half of Smackdown is starting to take shape. The back half is a different story; it's completely different from the shipped version. Esposito points out a "failed" experiment where an enemy stands behind metal bars. The idea is players can shoot through these bars to kill an enemy, but can't go through themselves. The setup still shows up in different forms throughout the game, but in this case, it's cut. "Just because it was a confusing concept to people," Esposito says. "It felt so important but it was actually completely unimportant to the concept of the level that it was distracting everyone."

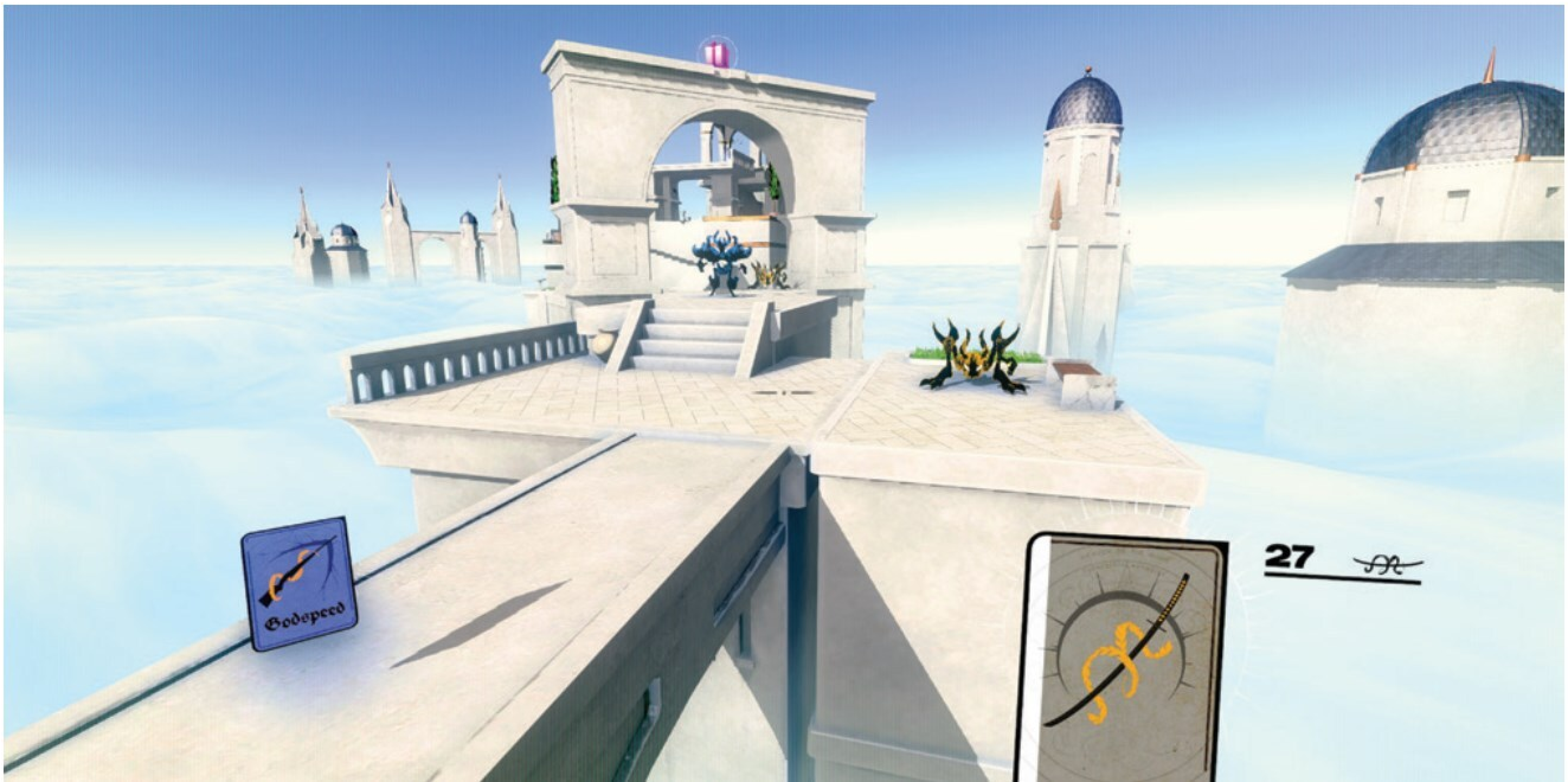
There's no average number of changes or tweaks between iterations; it ranges from small nudges to complete remakes. That said, quick math reveals the scale of Neon White's development. If we consider that it shipped with over 100 levels, the team made "double" that amount in scrapped levels, and Smackdown alone had more than 50 changes made to it, we're faced with thousands of tweaks and redesigns throughout the entire game. Neon White is made to play as fast as possible, but getting it to that point was a long, monumental task.

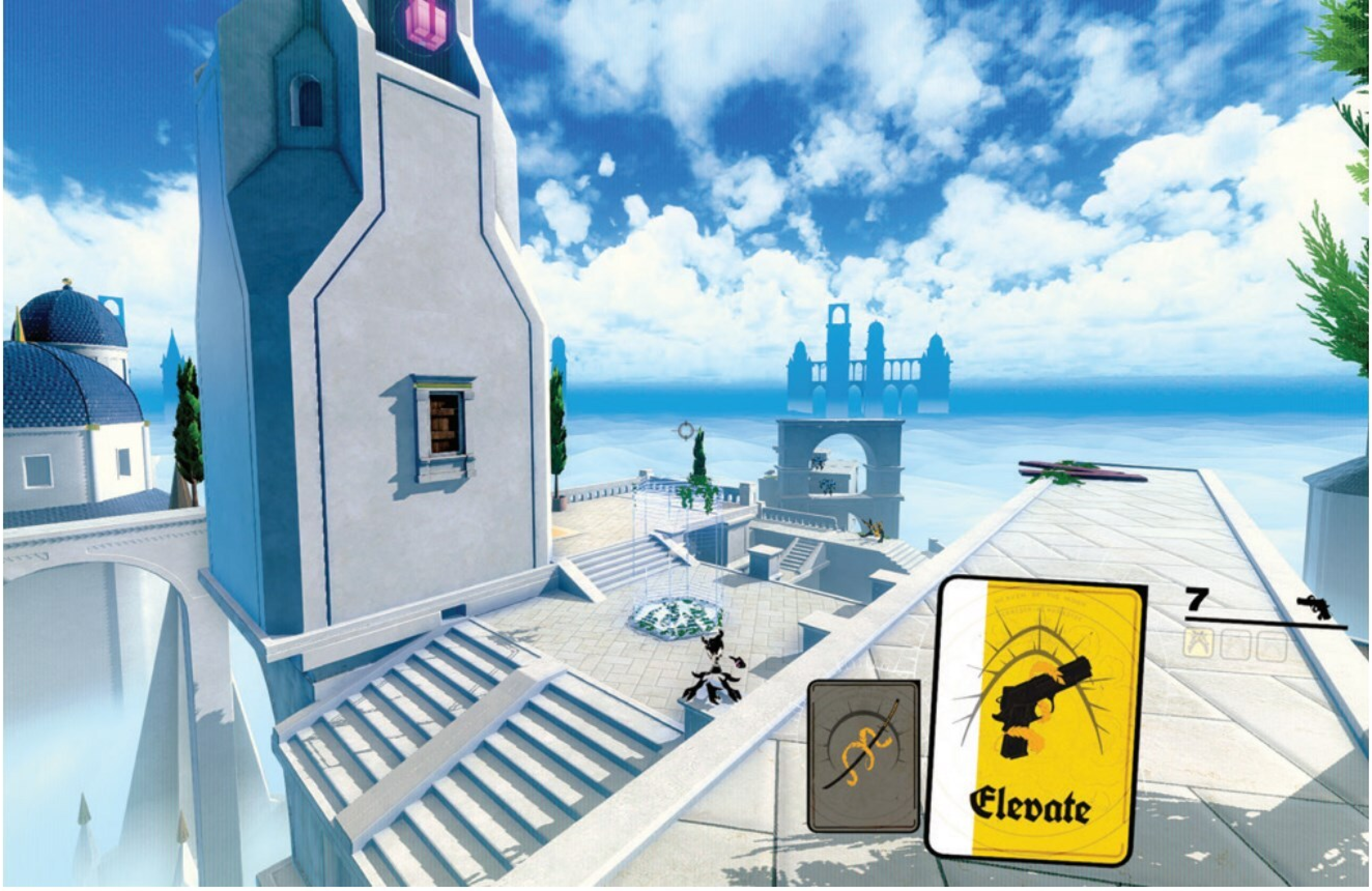
Additionally, the team came up with new ideas later in development and re-added them to the entire game. Smackdown, which was worked on from the very beginning to nearly the end, was one such level. It worked as a prototype for a Neon White stage and what it needed to be successful. That influenced the rest of the game and required new lessons to be reapplied throughout the whole of Neon White.

We jump ahead to January 2021. The runway is fixed, both beginning cards are perfectly visible. The first enemy to the right from earlier no longer drops a card. The dash still needs work, but it's getting closer. In the middle, there's an enemy at the top of the staircase, but you might miss that fact at first glance. The ending is close to the final version, maybe in a shippable state, but still a bit clunky.

Eight months later, and the two cards at the beginning are spaced further apart to allow the player more reaction time. The gap is much longer to make it clear you need two dashes to get both enemies. The enemy atop the staircase now shoots down at you, so you can see its location. Across the board, Smackdown is now giving the player more information, making it easier to navigate. It's becoming unambiguous. The ending is falling into place, but the pathing to the optional gift is unclear. It's reachable by jumping atop the columns surrounding the back of the level. But where the player needs to do that isn't, as Esposito calls it, inviting. It looks like a place the player isn't meant to reach.

But Smackdown is almost complete. And in a few more months, it'll be shippable.





MARCH 2022

Honor's last change was on March 5, 2022. Esposito's last bug fix was on March 27. He doesn't specify, but Esposito says this final version is full of small tweaks. The art is finalized and the whole thing looks like the Smackdown you may know.

The most significant change is the gift at the end. It's now far clearer there's a path around the back of the level leading to its hiding spot; it looks like part of the stage now, not a background element. Finally, two wooden planks are placed in the direction of the gift as a final nudge to the player.

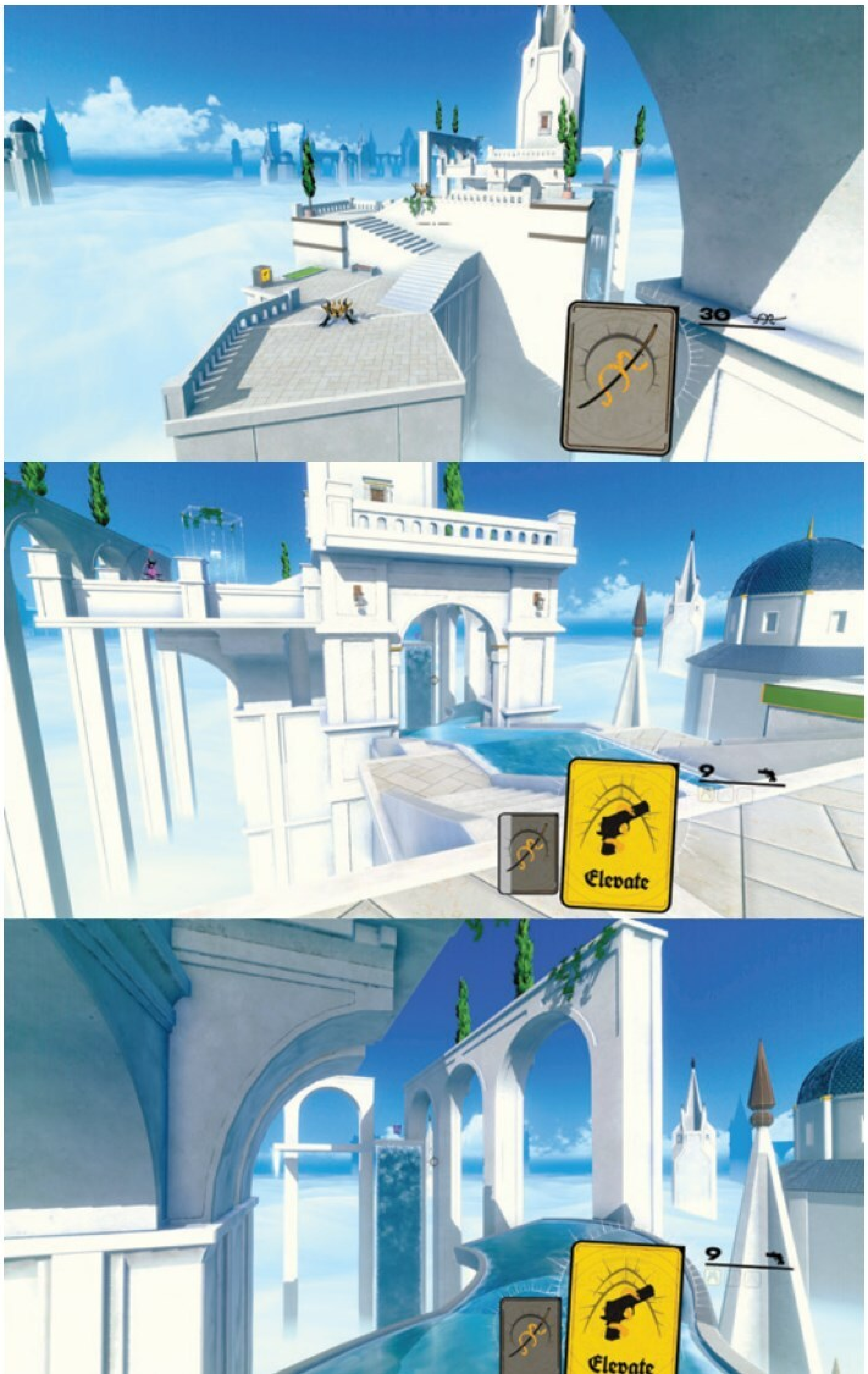
Three years later, Smackdown is complete.

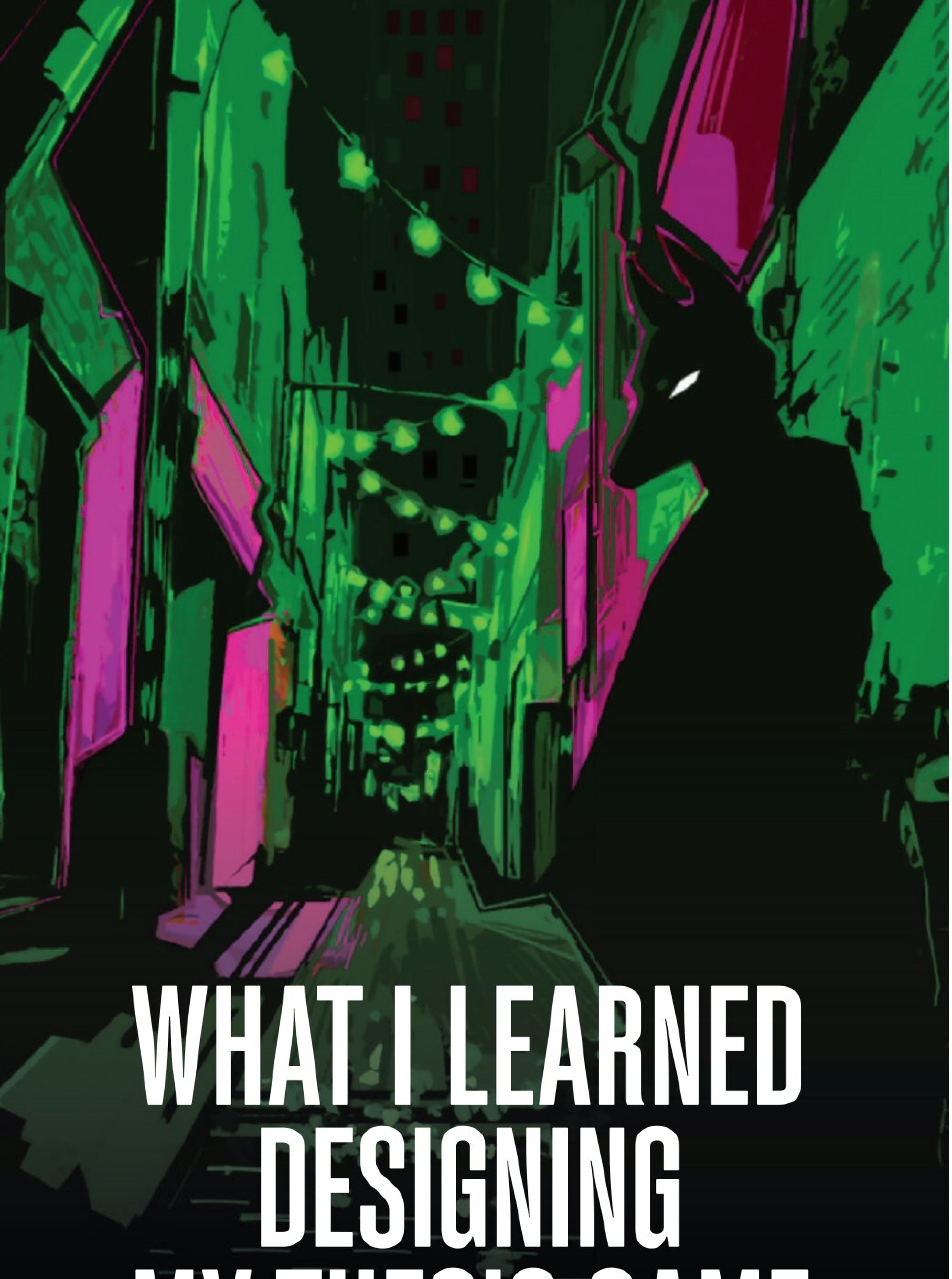
It's impossible to run down every tweak and change made throughout the level's development. Sadly, there was a lot we had to leave out, and almost certainly dozens of things the team didn't have time to go over with us. Nevertheless, an overview of three years of development distilled through the lens of one short level — even one completable in mere seconds — highlights the sheer scale of game development at all sizes. Neon White is a game made to be played quickly; it's digestible in short chunks. Its development was anything but.

From entire redesigns to minor additions players won't think twice about, it's about the sum total of its parts than any one thing.

Unless you're Honor, who boils Smackdown's success down to one tiny decision.

"I think when those two planks got put down, that's when it went from kind of a bad level to just about perfect," he jokes. ■





WHAT I LEARNED DESIGNING MY THESIS GAME

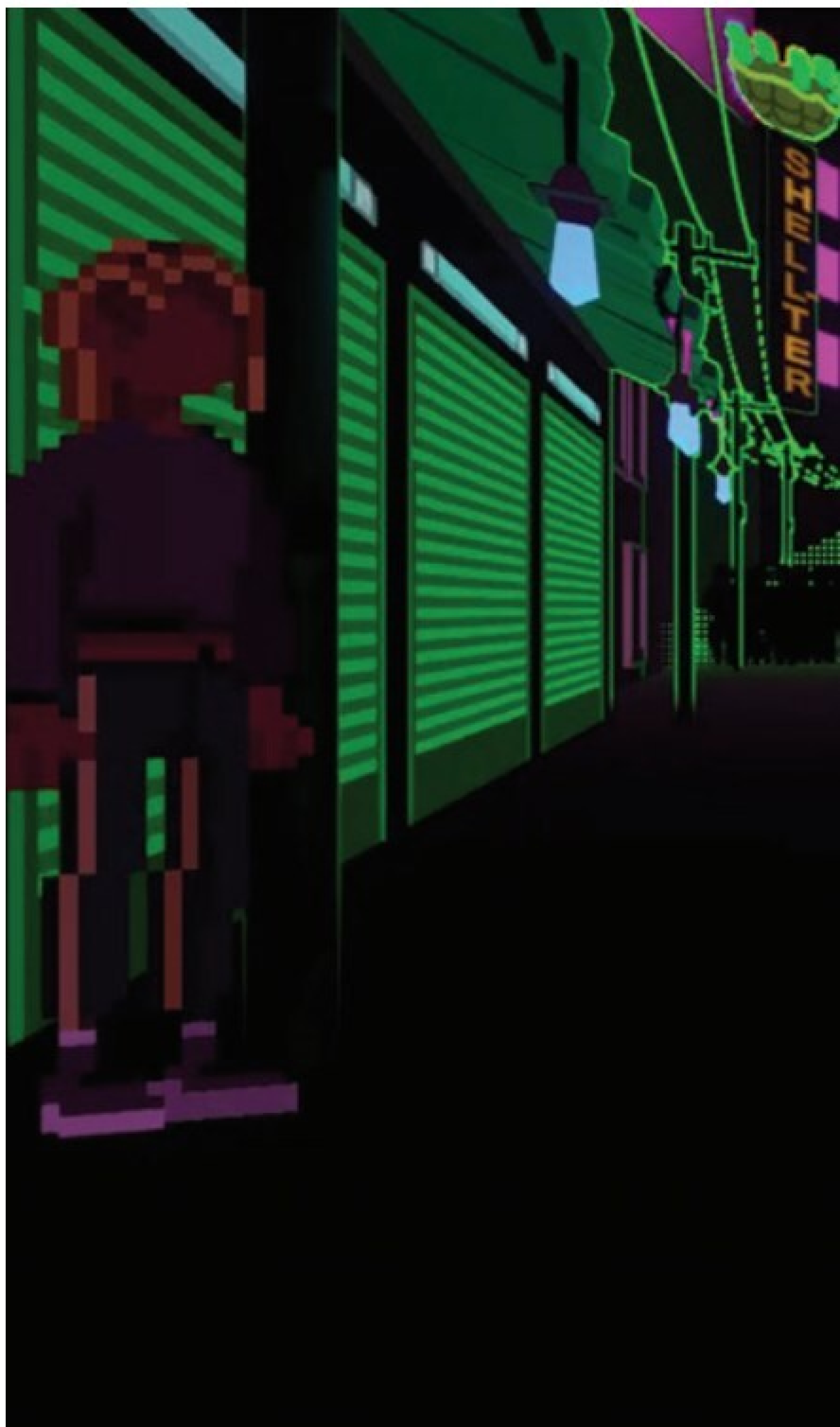
BY JASON GUISAO

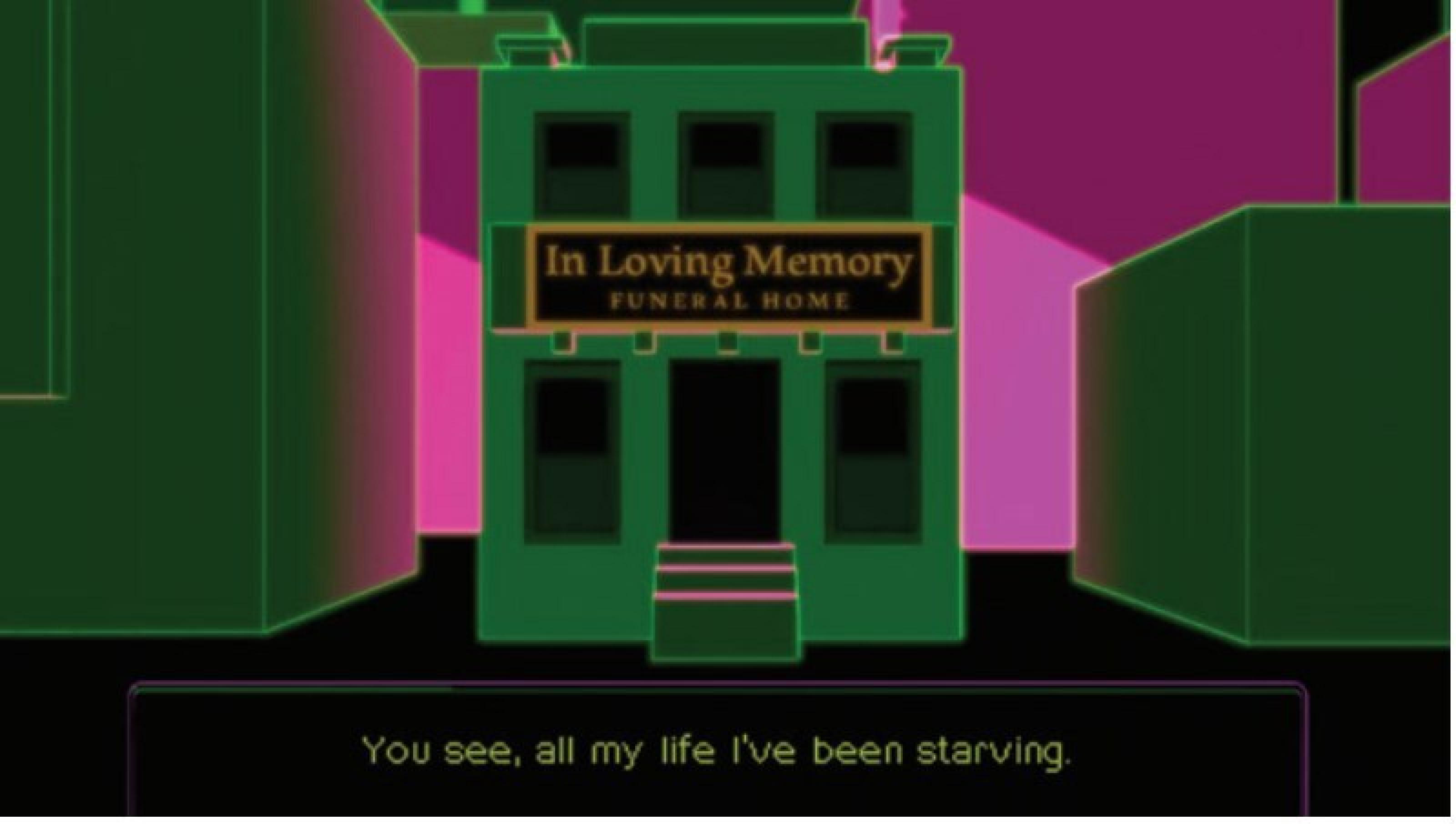
I MADE 12 LITTLE GAMES (analog and digital) over the course of my MFA program. However, I dedicated most of that time to my thesis. By graduation, I'd worked as a writer/narrative designer on prototypes, vertical slices, documentation – you name it. And after many adjustments, my thesis even won a highly competitive grant to assist postgrad development! Short deadlines and secondary assignments led to high-stress periods, albeit in a controlled, academic environment, but the lessons about collaboration and creativity were invaluable.

It's an ordinary school night, and I'm in a video call with my friend Jude. I watch them casually scroll through graffiti-adjacent concept art and brief clips of a passion project called Ponch: Cyberspace Investigator. They give me a rundown of the game's mechanics, inspirations, and vibe, which includes phrases like "platformer," "Ace Attorney-inspired dialogue puzzles," "detective work," and "hack the internet."

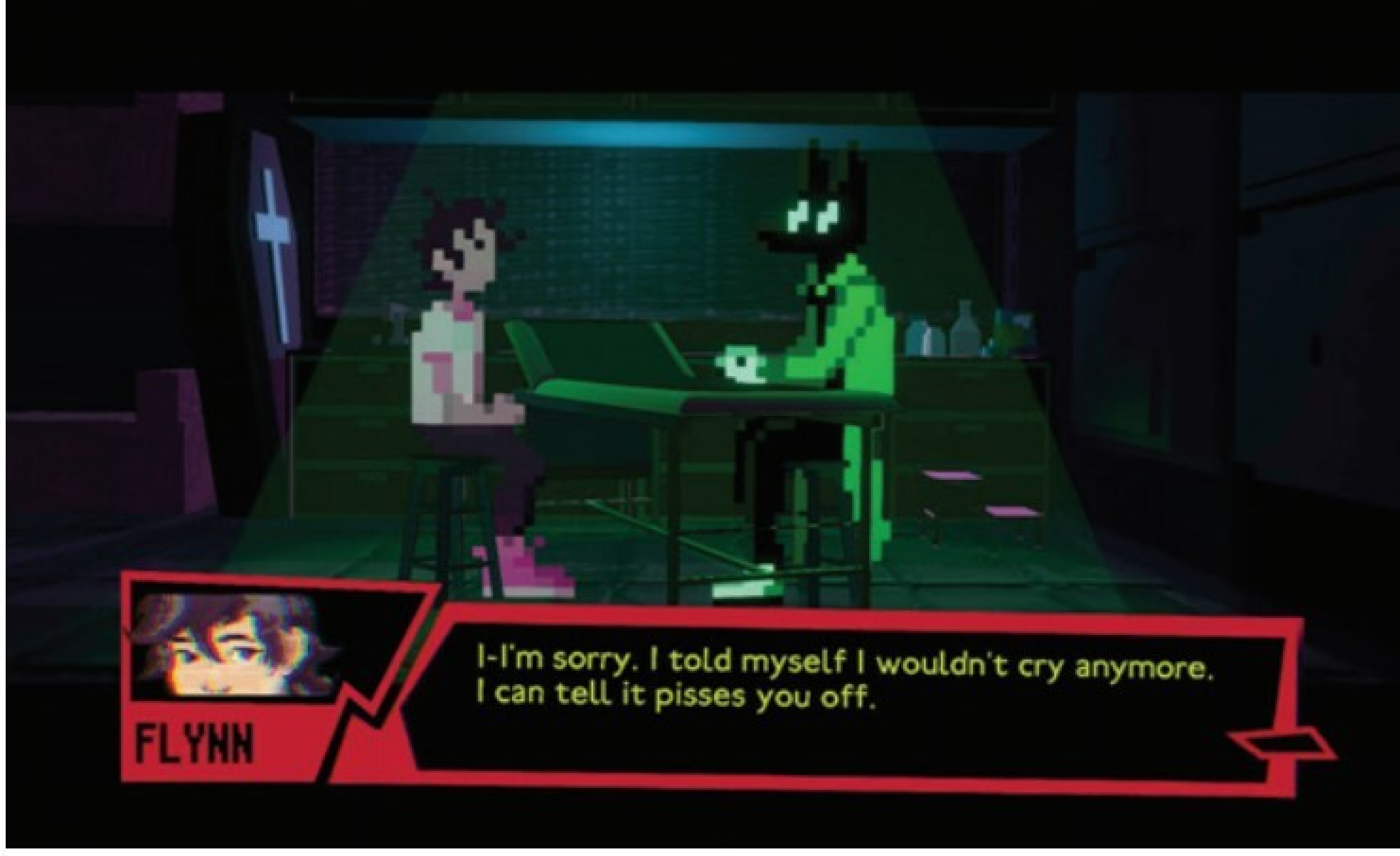
When I ask about the narrative, their eyes light up. Jude tells me about a virtual, dichromatic metropolis chockful of criminal hacktivists, government-owned surveillance systems, and class-based feuds. A slum world oozing with Persona's unmatched flair. But above all else, they say Ponch: Cyberspace Investigator is a celebration of resistance. A game that follows an eccentric crew of BIPOC lesbians who confront their dystopic society.

Suddenly, Jude clarifies that this is merely an idea they've worked on in tiny bursts over the past few years. "It's not concrete," their modest silence seems to imply. Even so, I want in.





You see, all my life I've been starving.



I-I'm sorry. I told myself I wouldn't cry anymore. I can tell it pisses you off.

At the beginning of Thesis class, we posted extensive character maps, wireframes for scene compositions/U.I. layouts, and various mood boards to our Miro. While Jude tinkered with the menu dialogue system, I drafted an opening scene based on their initial vision – Ponch, a dirt-poor private eye who runs her illegal practice out of the basement of an abandoned funeral home, is hired to find a missing person.

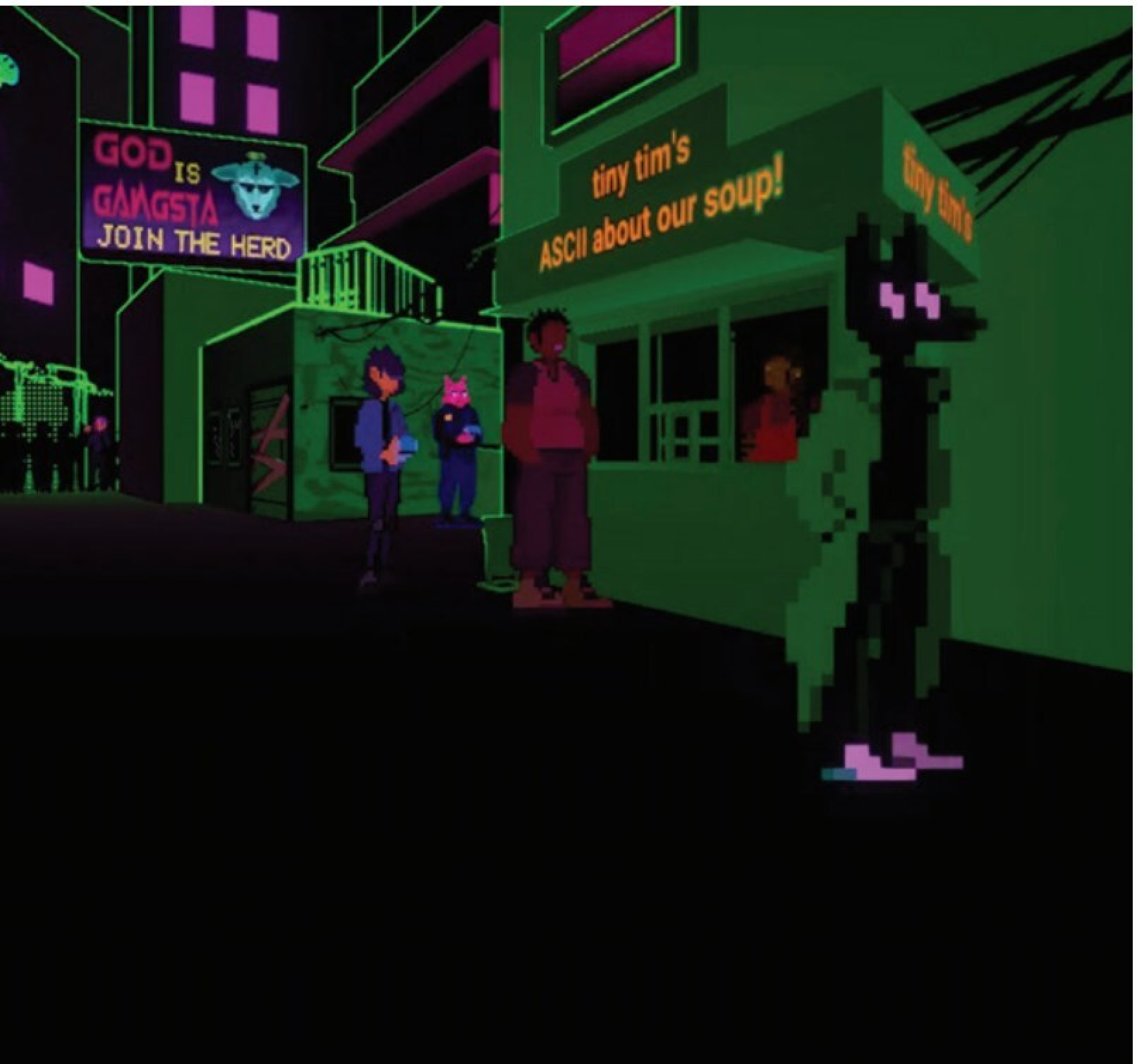
As the first few rounds of milestones drew near, Jude worked closely with a cinematographer and added dynamic camera angles to character conversations. Then, after finishing my screenplay, we implemented text and spent the entire night-before debugging. It took several long weeks to create a three-to-five-minute proof of concept that highlighted those aforementioned Ace Attorney-inspired dialogue puzzles.

As Ponch, the player probed a client about events leading up to the disappearance of their girlfriend. And after clicking on inconsistencies in the client's testimony, the discussion continued. Faculty feedback seemed worrisome, because there was still a critical question that needed answering: 'Beyond interrogations, what is the central loop?'

We needed help. So, Jude and I recruited Katie, a talented programmer who voiced an interest in working on our gameplay systems. Almost instantly, workloads decreased, giving the team room to conduct playtests and make more iterations. We'd spend hours debating a primary hacking mechanic that paralleled our gritty, detective narrative. And after much deliberation, we landed on giving players the ability to hack psyches; infiltrate minds (or "Mindspaces") for info/secrets and, consequently, make investigative breakthroughs.

Mindspaces became minigames that relied on visual storytelling to characterize other people. But how could we make the player feel clever? We returned to dialogue puzzles and made revisions inspired by age-old, cartoonish detectives armed with nothing but pens and pads. Instead of simply clicking through dialogue in search of contradictions, we built an inventory system for collectable quotes which players could present to NPCs during key instances. By giving players more agency in how they responded to other characters, confrontations were more dynamic and gratifying.

Solidifying these mechanics while polishing U.I., FX, and general juiciness (the embellishments that make play so satisfying) took almost six months. And for our final milestone, we proudly submitted a 20-minute playable demo. Ponch: Cyberspace Investigator gave me the opportunity to craft a queer story while also learning to embrace constructive criticism and constant revision within the framework of a small team. More importantly, designing my thesis game taught me to be trusting, inquisitive, and playful. ■



EMBRACE YOUR INNER NINTENDO FANDOM

BY MATT MILLER

① LEGO THE MIGHTY BOWSER

LEGO's partnership with Nintendo continues to be a tremendous treat for fans. The latest big set is a potent illustration of how the two entertainment giants fit together well. This massive 2,800+ piece build of Mario's iconic nemesis towers over a foot tall. Slick engineering allows for incredible poseability and playability, with button-driven head movement, a snapping maw, and the ability to launch fireballs at hapless plumbers from his dual-tower display stand. While the giant king of the Koopas is an impressive display piece in his own right, he's also compatible with the LEGO Mario Starter Course as an optional boss to add into the fun – Mario has to stomp on him several times to take him down.

$269 | *lego.com*

② THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD HYLIAN SHIELD

With Tears of the Kingdom on the way in early 2023, you could be excused if any latent Zelda mania has once again taken hold of your psyche. First4Figures offers some of the best collectibles around, marrying smartly selected subjects to high-quality precision designs. The Legend of Zelda's familiar shield design is immediately recognizable to even casual fans. An attractive silver frame borders the blue front with just enough texture and mottling to pull off a metallic sheen. The shield attaches to its base with a simple magnetic connector, making it easy to detach for a closer look. The 11.5-inch display is most affordable in its standard incarnation, but big spenders can go direct to the manufacturer for additional light-up features and a slick premium display box.

$79.99 (standard) | *gamestop.com*
$109 (exclusive) | *first4figures.com*

❸ GCHD MKII GAMECUBE HDMI CONVERTER

If you're a retro player looking for a comprehensive solution to enjoying GameCube alongside your modern tech, it's hard to go wrong with the GCHD MK-II. This plug-and-play adapter connects directly to your original GameCube console and provides lagless 480p play. You then have dual output options (which can run simultaneously) – one HDMI that could be used for video capture or running on a modern flat-screen, and a separate legacy output to a CRT. In other words, it's an ideal solution for streaming. A 3.5 mm Aux port supports both digital and analog audio output. Less expensive options are on the market if you only need HDMI conversion, but the GCHD MK-II hits all the marks for bringing the fondly remembered console into modern usage.

$159 | *eongaming.com*

❹ SPLIT PAD COMPACT

Hori's earlier Split Pad is one of the best options for improving the core Joy-Con controller options on the Switch. The redesigned compact version sticks with what's great about that controller alongside a sleeker form factor while maintaining a feature-rich experience that is a step up from the first-party pack-ins. The Compact features full-size analog sticks and a d-pad, programmable rear triggers for additional input options, and an optional turbo button function. While similar at first glance to standard Joy-Cons, the slightly wider contour and back-grips make for a superior ergonomic hold while in handheld play. Just be aware that it's not made for use in docked mode, and doesn't support rumble, gyro, or NFC. Available in an apricot red or dual-color white and yellow, this excellent alternative controller easily snaps into place on either a standard Switch or an OLED model. ■

$49.99 | *stores.horiusa.com*

GCHD
Mk-II
e·o·n
Mk-II
e·o·n
3

NINTENDO SWITCH
4

OPINION

YOU ARE NOT THE TARGET AUDIENCE, AND THAT'S OKAY

BY MATT MILLER

I RECALL MY DISAPPOINTMENT. I had fallen in love with Square's Final Fantasy II (later redubbed Final Fantasy IV here in the United States), with its rich cast of characters, intriguing battles, and surprising settings. I was already an RPG fan when Cecil and Rosa's grand adventure lit up my imagination for what console RPGs could be. Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest hit store shelves the next year, and I eagerly piled up my allowance money on the counter to snag a copy. I popped the cartridge into my SNES and prepared to be amazed, only to be let down by a childish jaunt that engendered little to nothing of the epic quality I'd seen in that game I loved.

It was a letdown, but I'm glad I internalized the truth early. As my gaming hobby ramped up in subsequent years, it became an object lesson I was happy I had confronted: not everything is made for me, and that's just fine.

In today's gaming marketplace, players have a vast array of options to choose from for their entertainment. They run the gamut from simple one-input mobile games to vast massively multiplayer affairs that can consume years of leisure time. It's a great time to enjoy interactive entertainment. However, I also see surprising levels of vitriol leveled at projects because they don't match a particular vision for what games should be – especially if that game is in a genre or franchise with established fans and expectations.

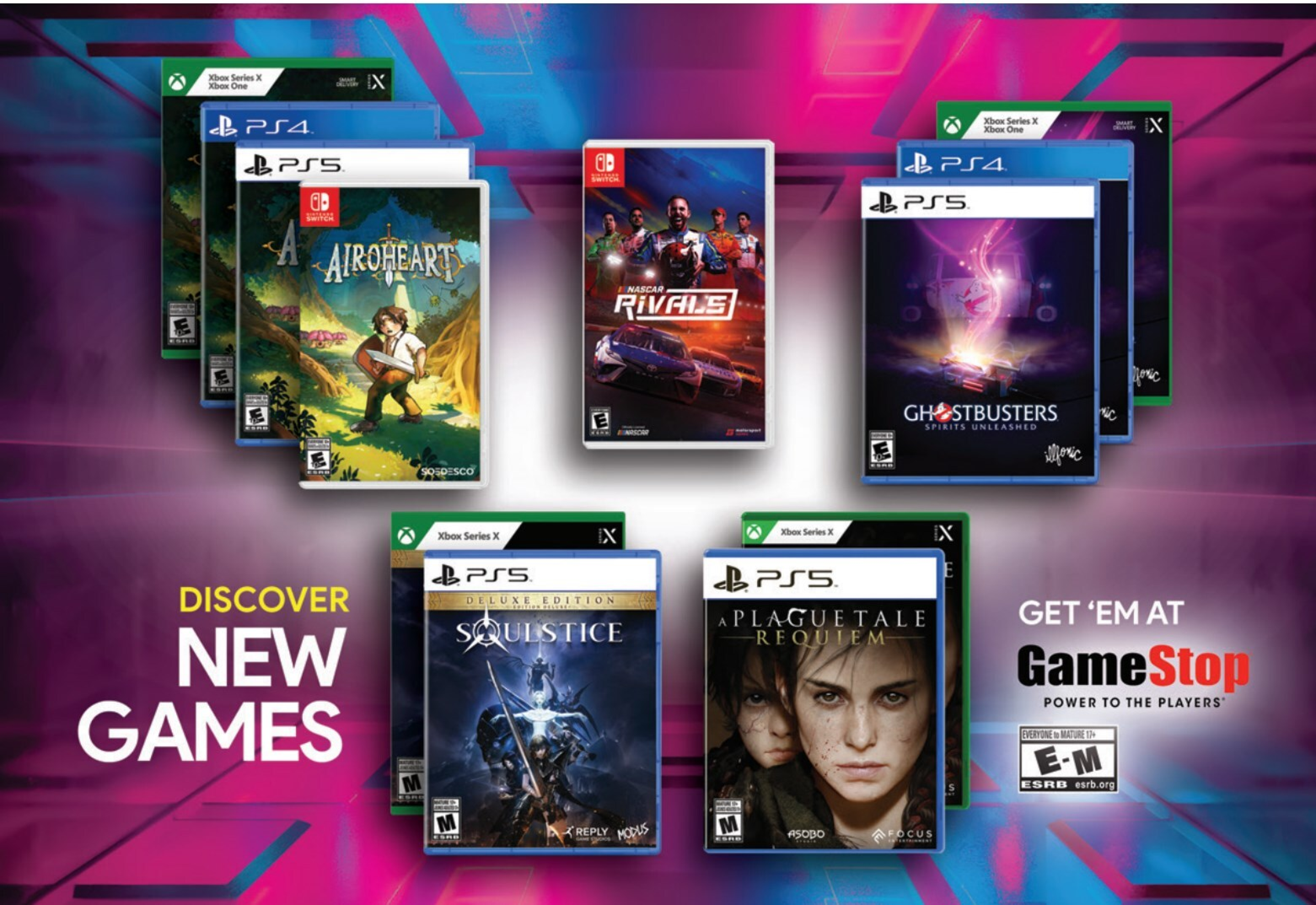
I'm guilty of falling into the trap, even after my childhood lesson with Mystic Quest. Why did they take my favorite story-based shooter and turn it into a battle royale? What's with this chibi version of that pathos-laden Japanese action game? Who asked for a mobile version of this fighting game that's way better on console?

The answer, of course, is that I'm not the player those games are trying to reach. Game makers would be foolish to rest on the laurels of their previous efforts or settle for reaching one corner of the vast marketplace of gaming individuals. And that's a good thing! That kiddy version of my favorite action game doesn't diminish the franchise's potential. It opens that world up to newcomers who may eventually join core fans, expand the player base, and support upcoming sequels, related projects, and the overall health of the thing I already like. Was that latest event in my favorite living game built to appeal to newcomers? All the better, for the chance that some of those people may someday be available for my next high-level raid.

Likewise, as gaming enthusiasts, it seems as if we should celebrate players who game on their phones and tablets, rather than dismiss that branch of the hobby for being too casual or unsophisticated. Different games bring joy to different people and in different ways. That rush I get from a new exotic drop in Destiny isn't really that dissimilar from the one someone feels when they match five colored gems on their phone. I tend to think that's a win for everybody.

Put another way, someone else enjoying games I don't like doesn't invalidate my own enthusiasm. Rather, the breadth and variety of games on the market suggest that the gaming hobby, in its most expansive interpretation, has something special that appeals to everyone. So, maybe I wasn't the kid who needed Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest to fall in love with gaming. But I bet someone did. ■

↘ Bungie is constantly tweaking Destiny 2 to reach both longtime players and newcomers. Certain content pieces are clearly targeted to one group or the other



Untangling the multiversal madness of Bayonetta 3

by MARCUS STEWART

DOUBLE TROUBLE

PLATINUMGAMES EMBODIES STYLE, imagination, and risk-taking. Spawned in 2007 by Capcom veterans, including Resident Evil creator Shinji Mikami and Devil May Cry and Okami mastermind Hideki Kamiya, the studio became a haven for these minds to create new franchises under the freedom of independence. Early success like MadWorld turned heads, but Platinum's third title, Bayonetta, cemented it as one of the game industry's premier action studios.

Launching in Japan in 2009 and hitting U.S. shores in 2010, Bayonetta revamped and, in some ways, improved the stylish action of its spiritual predecessor, Devil May Cry. The bewitching adventure reinvented and reinvigorated the stylish action genre; Platinum created its magnum opus in only two years. Unfortunately, sales didn't match the reception, and Sega, the game's original publisher, passed on a sequel. Despite fans' cries, Bayonetta seemingly ended the series before it could take off.

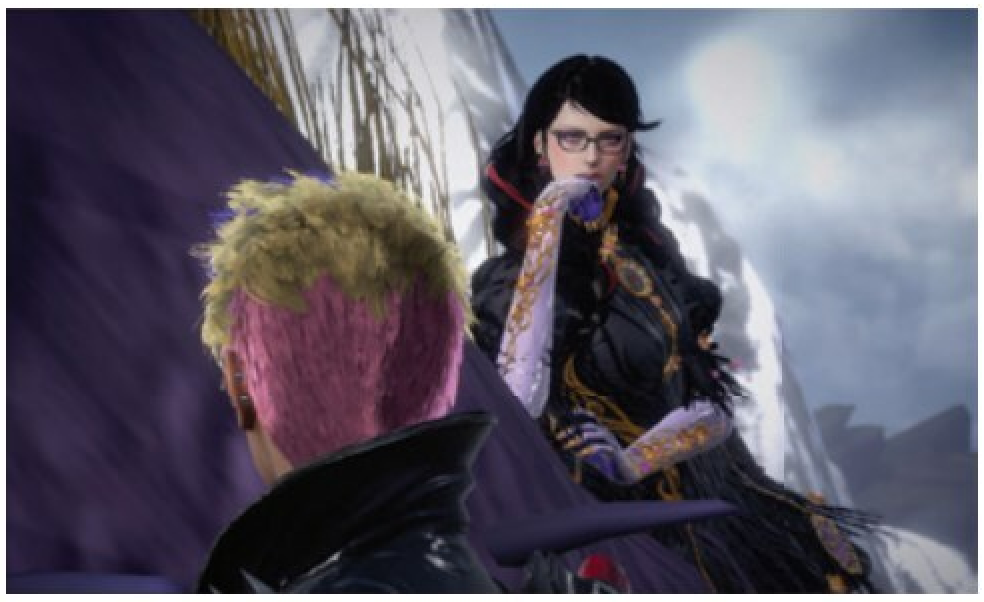
Nintendo stepped up to answer those pleas by agreeing to publish a follow-up. Bayonetta 2 arrived in 2014 as a Wii U exclusive. The sequel proved Bayonetta wasn't a one-hit wonder, becoming one of the year's best games with some fans believing it surpassed its predecessor. The success also proved the family-friendly Nintendo had no problem letting the franchise remain true to its Mature-rated self.

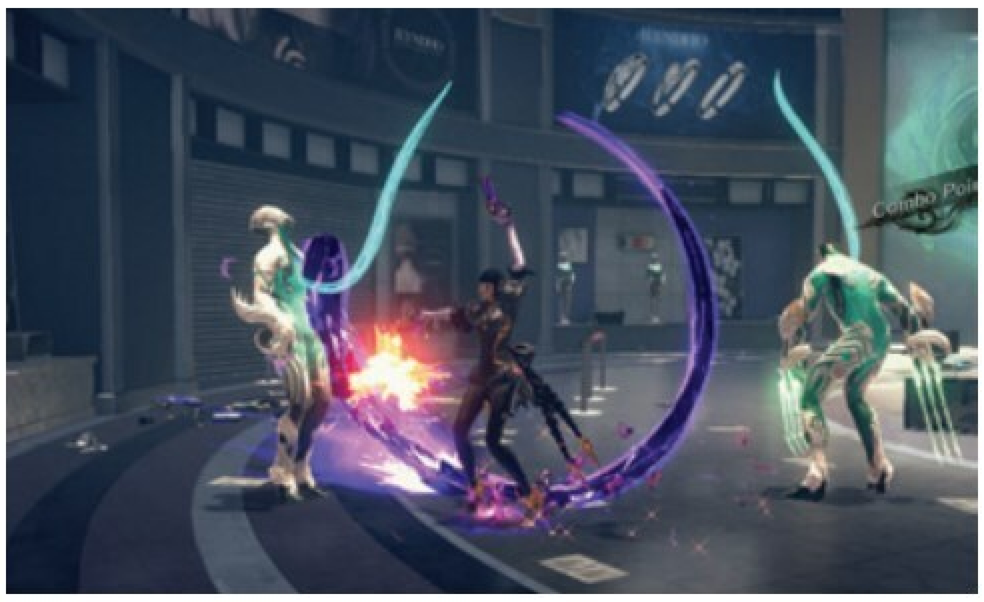
When the Nintendo Switch launched in 2017, it didn't take long for Platinum to reveal Bayonetta 3 as another Nintendo exclusive. However, the third game vanished from the spotlight shortly after, kicking off four years of infrequent updates and uncertainty about its existence.

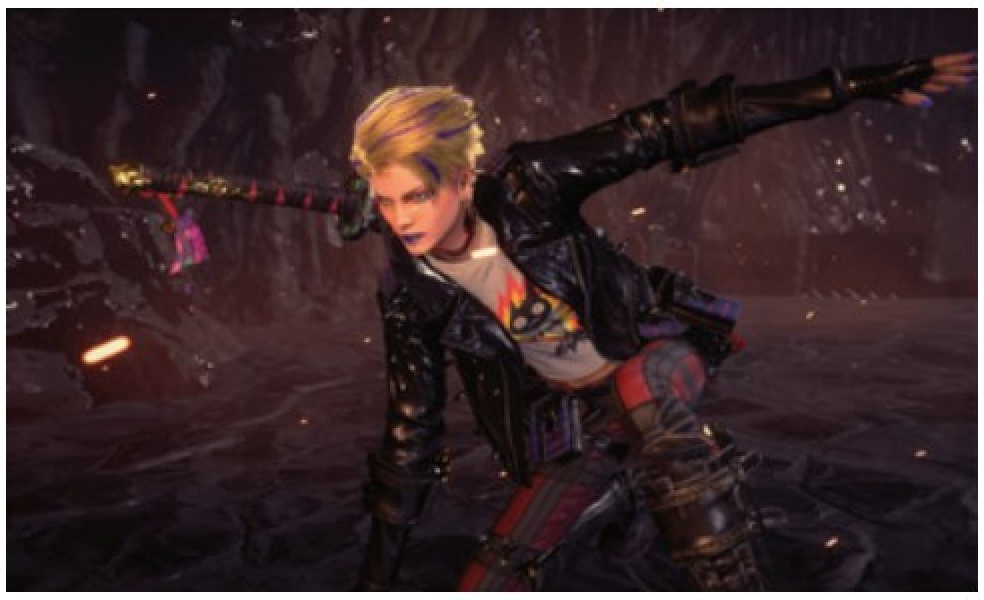
That finally changed last September when the game re-debuted with its first gameplay trailer. It unveiled a newly designed Bayonetta, sporting a fresh but familiar hairdo, doing what she does best: kicking the crap out of her enemies with brutal style and grace. Eyebrows raised even higher when Bayonetta conjured her faithful demon Gomorrah to go toe-to-toe with a titanic adversary in a kaiju-sized version of a Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robot fight. Since then, information on Bayonetta 3 has steadily trickled in. A multiverse introducing alternative versions of Bayonetta. A never-before-seen breed of enemies. And a new, foul-mouthed witch at the center of it.

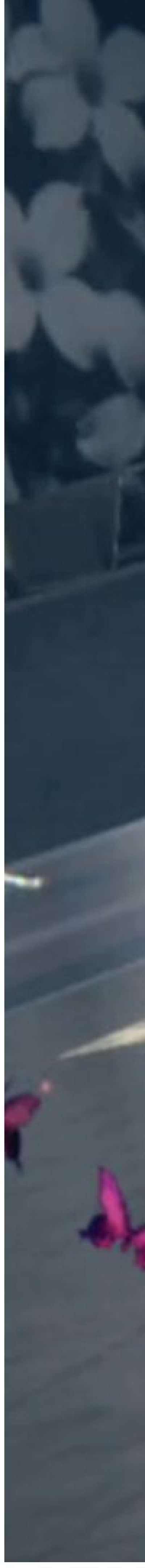
Bayonetta 3 is finally on the horizon and has years of anticipation and legacy to live up to. Platinum enthusiastically embraces this pressure. Instead of resting on the series' laurels, it brings a number of big ideas to the table (literally, in some cases), creating a monster of a sequel too big for a single dimension.

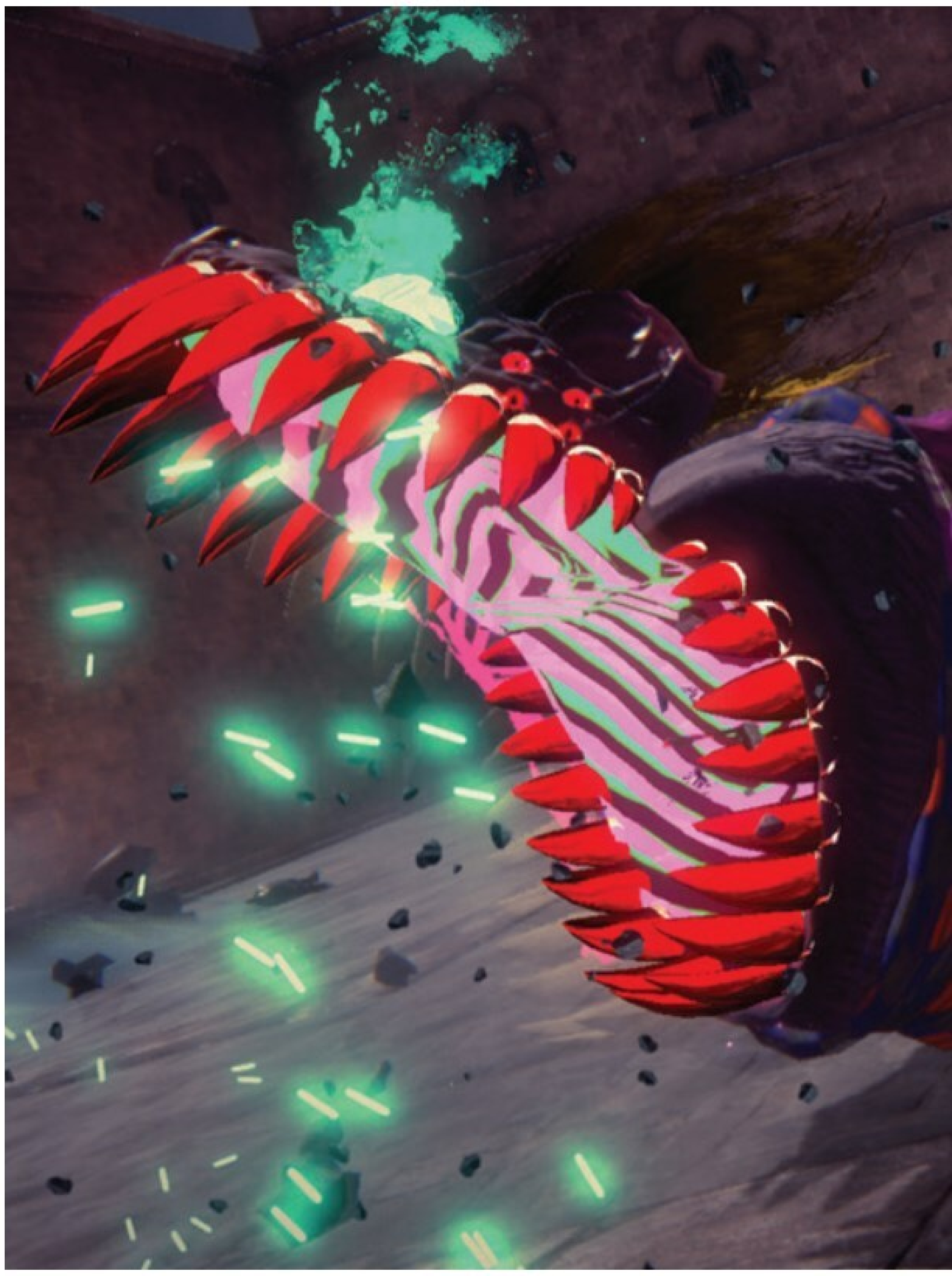
PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER PlatinumGames **RELEASE** October 28











Bayo with the New Voice

Platinum confirmed to us that Hellena Taylor, who served as Bayonetta's English voice actress in the first two games, does not reprise the role in Bayonetta 3. Instead, the Umbra Witch is brought to life by veteran performer Jennifer Hale.

"Various overlapping circumstances made it difficult for Hellena Taylor to reprise her role," says director Yusuke Miyata. "We held auditions to cast the new voice of Bayonetta and offered the role to Jennifer Hale, whom we felt was a good match for the character. I understand the concerns some fans have about the voice change at this point in the series, but Jennifer's performance was way beyond what we could have imagined. I'm confident that her portrayal of Bayonetta will exceed our fans' expectations."

Despite this change, Platinum also confirmed that Bayonetta's Japanese VO remains unchanged. She's still voiced by Atsuko Tanaka.

Having heard the performance myself, I found Hale's portrayal exceptional and sometimes indistinguishable from Taylor's excellent work. Careful listening makes the difference noticeable, but it's not jarring. Of course, this change may also fuel speculation that this Bayonetta isn't the same witch that fans fell in love with, but we'll touch on that theory later.

"IT SEEMS I'M UNFASHIONABLY LATE. BUT I'M READY TO GIVE YOU EVERYTHING YOU WANT"

The years-long wait has many fans asking two questions: what took so long, and why was Platinum so quiet? I presented these questions to Bayonetta 3's principal developers: director Yusuke Miyata, producer Yuji Nakao, and supervising director Hideki Kamiya. Platinum's top brass wouldn't offer specific reasons for the game's wait, only saying that it was necessary to create the ultimate Bayonetta experience.

"We put a lot into the previous titles, too, but because this is a sequel, we decided to put in even more content this time," says Miyata. "As a result, we kept our fans waiting, but it will be worth the wait."

I'm among the fans that eagerly ate up any morsel of information about the game over the years; I couldn't wait to finally get my hands on it. Thankfully, a trip to Nintendo of America's headquarters in Redmond, Washington, granted my wish. I played two demos set during the early hours of Bayonetta 3, which gave me a chance to test drive both the titular witch and newcomer Viola.

Narratively, Kamiya states that Bayonetta 3 takes place not too long after the events of the last game. The demo begins immediately after the game's prologue. As the scene fades in, I'm greeted by the familiar jazzy tune of The Gates of Hell, the underworld bar and weapons shop owned by Rodin, the series' demonic weapons smith. He's not alone. Bayonetta, her best friend and sister-in-arms Jeanne, and a weeping Enzo, Bayo's Joe Pesci-inspired informant, stand present and accounted for. The underground bar shakes and rumbles; something big is going down on the surface and sounds like it's going to crash through the roof at any moment. Enzo, rocking a baseball cap, t-shirt, and sports jacket instead of his usual suit and hat, cries over a shattered picture of his children, Ed and Edna, implying something terrible may have happened to them. Rodin assures the gang that the bar can withstand whatever onslaught is unfolding up top. After all, Enzo has a tab to pay.

"This place will hold for a little while," says Rodin. "A very little while."

Rodin explains the source of the disturbance: The Homunculi, Bayonetta 3's new class of enemies that hail from neither Paradiso nor Inferno. Rather, these monstrosities are man-made in origin. I don't get much time to ponder the Homunculi's origins before Viola, a young Umbra Witch trainee and Bayonetta 3's second playable protagonist, barges into the room. This punk rock-inspired warrior brandishes a katana and plenty of attitude. Viola greets Bayonetta

and Jeanne with familiarity, but the two witches don't recognize her at all.

Viola breathlessly attempts to explain the complicated truth: She hails from an alternate reality and is acquainted with our witchy friends in that timeline. The revelation prompts Rodin to explain the concept of the multiverse, which he compares to slices of fine wagyu beef someone is attempting to shove into a meat grinder.

The multiverse has been an element of Bayonetta lore since the first game, but this adventure places it front and center, blowing it out like never before. As seen in trailers, expect to encounter multiple versions of Bayonetta hailing across various timelines. Though Platinum wouldn't divulge what these variants bring to the table, this premise couldn't have come at a better time. The multiverse concept has gained mainstream familiarity thanks to Marvel and DC's cinematic universes, and films such as *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. Platinum states that while it turned to such works for reference, it's ultimately is doing its own spin on the idea.

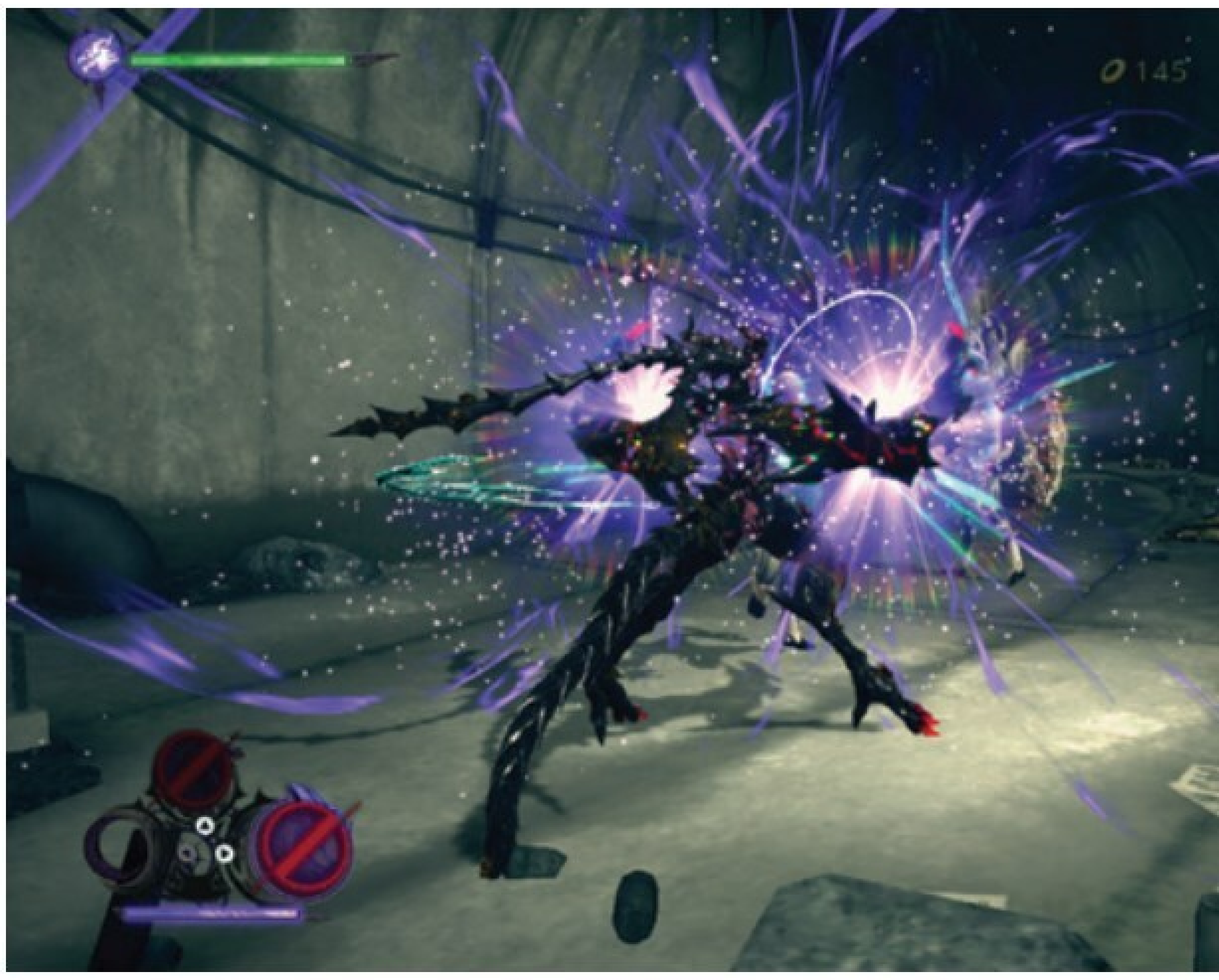
"I'm actually a huge fan of the MCU movies, and recently I really enjoyed watching the *Loki* series," says Kamiya. "I had already finished writing the plot for Bayonetta 3 at the time I started watching *Loki*, and this series did not have any influence over the Bayonetta 3 story per se ... Quite a bit of time has passed since then, and now that the multiverse concept has a solid foundation in entertainment, I feel that it's easier for people to absorb the concept and enjoy the story of Bayonetta to an even greater degree."

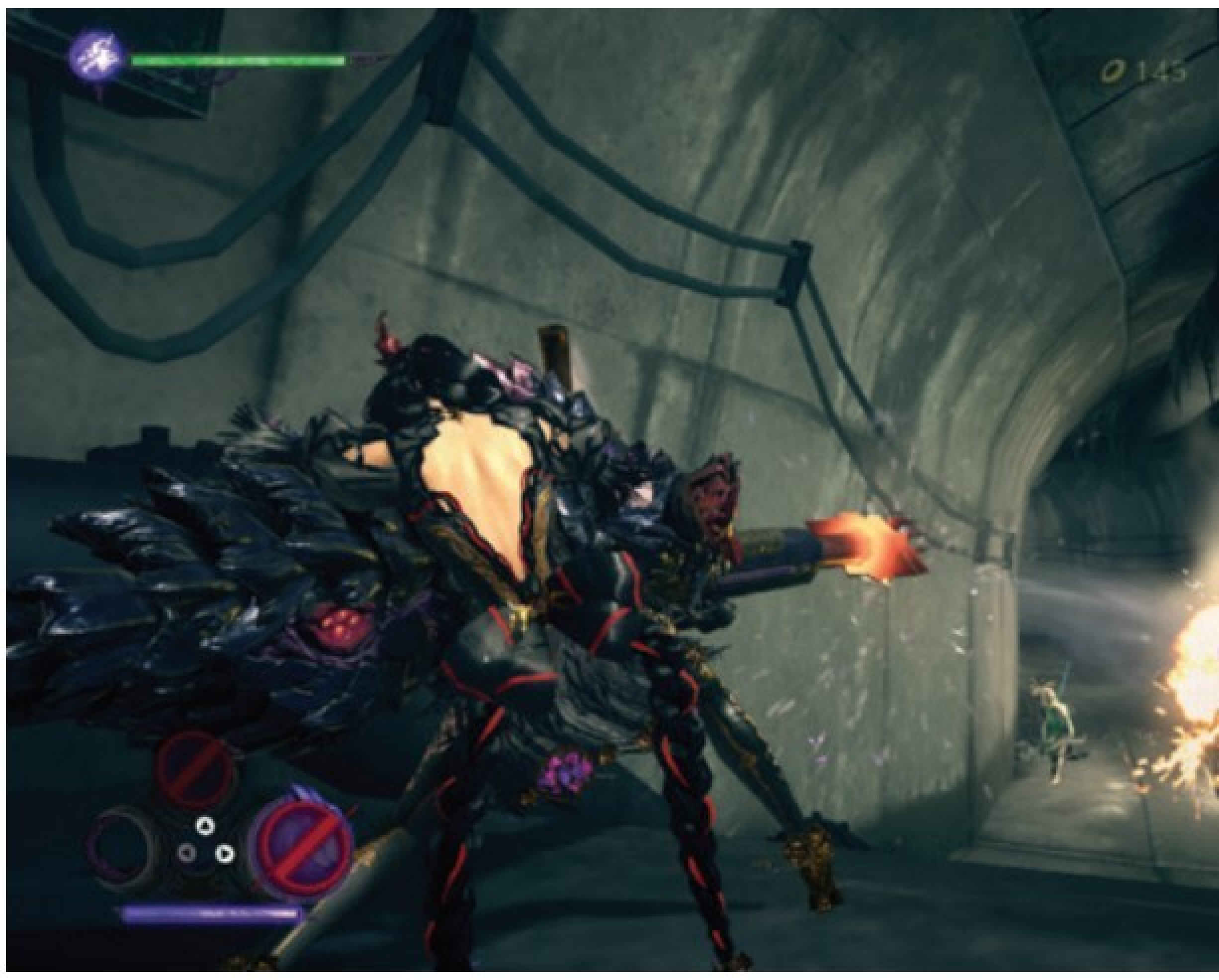
Although Kamiya says players familiar with the series will have an easier grasp of Bayonetta 3's plot, Platinum is presenting the story and world in a manner that will be newcomer-friendly.

Back at the Gates of Hell, Viola says she's on a mission to locate a scientist named Dr. Sigrund and a device called a Chaos Gear. Somehow, bringing these elements together will be vital to preventing the multiverse's collapse. At this moment, I'm introduced to Viola's demonic companion, Cheshire. This cartoonish oversized cat chills by the bar, resembling an anime version of the mischievous critter made famous in *Alice in Wonderland*. As Viola beckons it, Cheshire stretches its large multi-colored maw and coughs up a vintage penny-farthing bicycle, of all things. Cheshire hops atop the old-timey bike, and Bayonetta and Viola sit on Cheshire's ample noggin as the demon whisks them through a portal to begin their quest.

VERSE 7
Combo Points
0000 x1.15
300

A DEMONIC INFLUENCE





Bayonetta and Viola arrive in Thule, an island serving as a junction point used for traveling between multiverses. Players will have to wait to learn how this mysterious location operates, but a welcoming party of Homunculi greets me moments after my arrival. These green-tinted enemies are man-made lifeforms made up of numerous living bodies. As such, they can reconfigure their bodies, transform their limbs, and even split themselves into multiple forms, a technique used to outnumber and gang up on Bayonetta. Like the angels and demons before them, Homunculi take on a variety of shapes and sizes, from humanoid grunts to more abstract shapes, such as gelatinous spheres or colossal, armor-clad titans.

With a gaggle of Homunculi standing in my way, I get my first sample of Bayonetta 3's combat. Bayonetta controls identically to previous entries, making it easy to slip back into the satisfying dance of chaining combos, peppering foes with her new purple tri-barrel guns (dubbed "Colour My World"), unleashing elaborate Torture Attacks, and split-second dodging to activate the time-slowing Witch Time effect. To put it bluntly, it feels like a Bayonetta game, but our hero has a number of new tricks up her sleeve.

I immediately notice that Bayonetta moves even more gracefully, almost as if dancing on air. Her attacks also incorporate more elements of Madama Butterfly, the beautiful demonic entity from which she traditionally draws most of her power. This change is attributed to Demon Masquerade, one of the new pillars of Bayonetta 3's combat.

Demon Masquerade channels the power of the demons inhabiting Bayonetta's weapons, altering her combat style and transformations. Madama Butterfly, for example, is tied to her pistols, lending her the combat attributes previously described. Gomorrah, Bayonetta's dragon-like pet, embodies an oversized hammer called the G-Pillar. Using this weapon trades speed for power as G-Pillar can knock out foes with only a few deliberate swings. G-Pillar also acts as a firearm, unleashing powerful blasts from its handle-like gun barrel. Other demons include the giant spider Phantasmaraneae, whose disc-like weapon lets players fire webs that temporarily immobilize opponents. Expect many demonic arms, and since you can cycle between two weapon sets on the fly, players can concoct varied strings of offensive combo attacks.

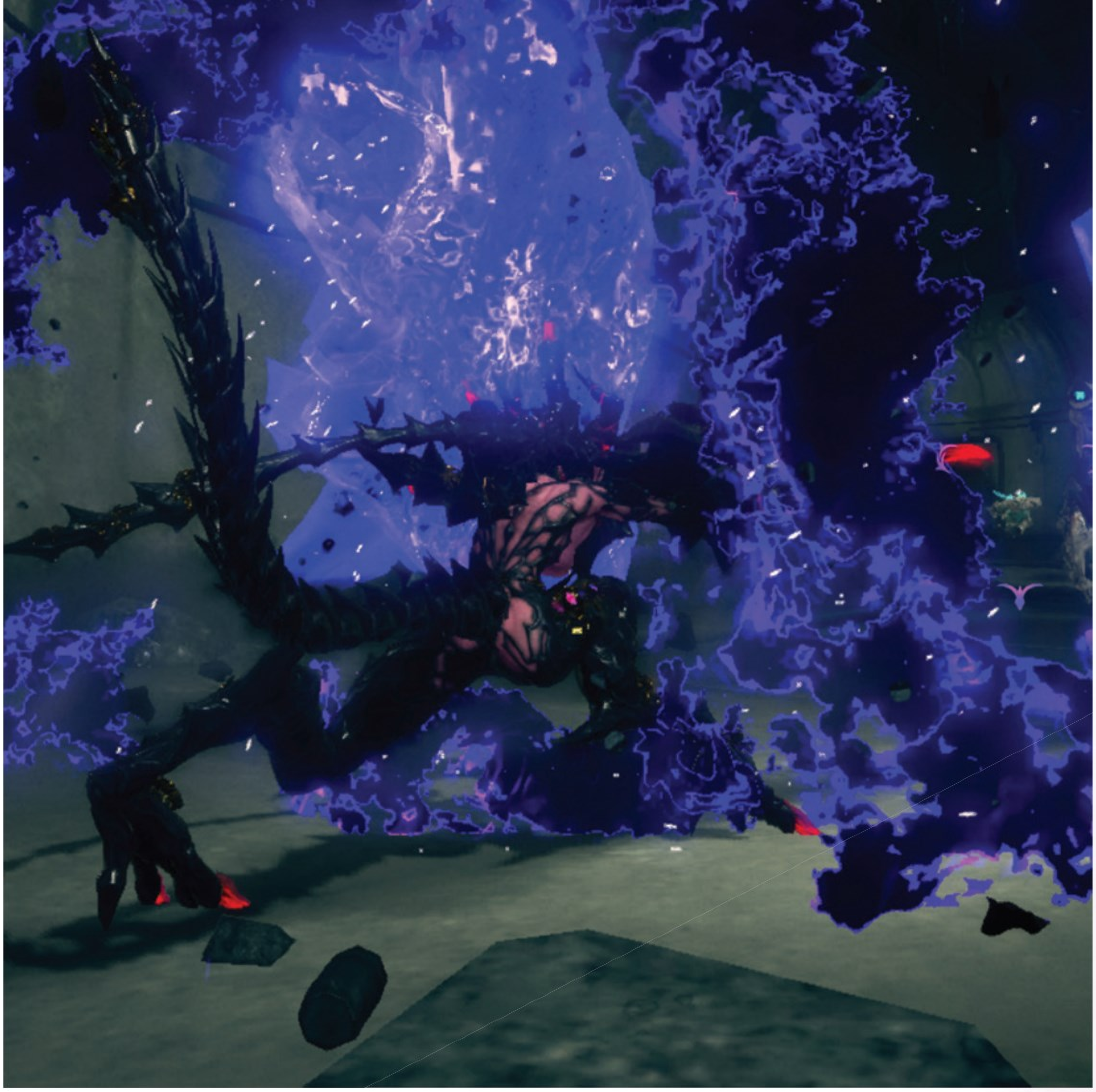
Wink Slave offers another offensive twist. While unleashing a combo, timing a ZL button press with a telltale weapon glimmer ends your flurry with a powerful demonic strike. Masquerade Rage offers a more prolonged form of special attack. In Madama Butterfly's case, Bayonetta can conjure her massive arms to deal devastating, wide-reaching melee attacks.

Demon Masquerade also serves as an evolution of Beast Within, the transformation mechanic from previous entries. Instead of morphing into a panther to run faster or a crow to fly higher, Bayonetta now assumes the form of the equipped demon, bestowing a range of useful abilities for combat and exploration. Turning into a smaller version of Madama Butterfly still allows Bayonetta to quickly cover ground as the panther did, but she hovers using her wings instead of running. Gomorrah's power turns Bayonetta into a bestial version of herself, sporting giant claws and the ability to leap long distances. Phantasmaraneae allows Bayonetta to crawl up walls and cross gaps by swinging on a web line.

"Initially, there was some debate about how to carry Beast Within over to this game, and we thought

3995
VERSE 11

2467
3995
VERSE 11
Combo Points
0000 x1.00
15



doing the same thing wouldn't show any improvement or evolution on Bayonetta's part, so we decided to elevate it to the new Demon Masquerade system," says Miyata.

The new Demon Slave feature takes Bayonetta's reliance on her otherworldly minions even further. By holding the ZL button, players can summon and directly control an Infernal Demon during combat.

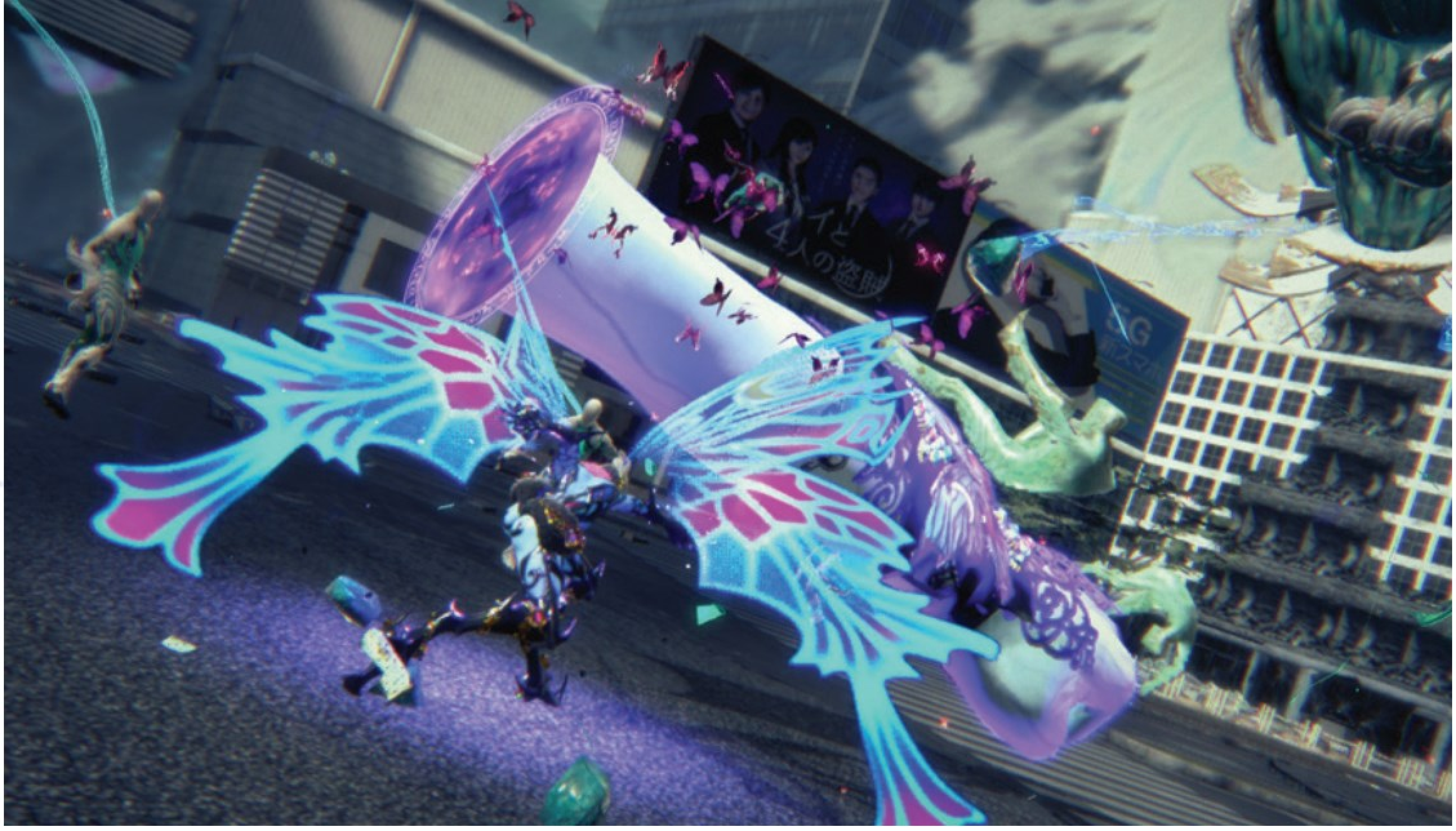
"Bayonetta has her 'Climax Summon' magic, but in the previous games, they were cinematic finishing moves," explains Miyata. "They were visually impressive and gave the satisfying feeling of having finished off an enemy, but for this game, we felt that making those visually stunning finishing moves part of actual gameplay would add another level of fun and impact and got to work with that idea in mind."

VERSE 7
0000
200

A Tamer Witch Trial

Bayonetta games can be tough, and the third game features three difficulty modes: Casual, Standard, and Expert. For those who want to enjoy the story without mastering the combat's reflex-heavy nuances, an accessory called Immortal Marionette allows players to automatically perform combos and defensive moves using a single button. However, using this item penalizes players who play with Standard or Expert difficulty.

Additionally, Bayonetta's penchant for sexual imagery and innuendo returns in full form in the threequel, but players can choose to tone it down thanks to Naive Angel Mode. This optional feature reduces the game's sexuality in minute ways; for example, Bayonetta shows less skin when executing her garment-shedding Climax Summons. Naive Angel Mode doesn't sanitize the game's violence, and feels slightly closer to being PG-13 as opposed to kid-friendly. Since the Switch is a portable device that can be played in a variety of social settings, Platinum wants Naive Angel Mode to offer a more couth experience if you're worried about attracting unwanted side-eyes while playing Bayonetta 3 at the family picnic or on a busy subway.



Demons pack a wallop, able to obliterate foes with only a few attacks. It's even better when you trigger Witch Time to give your creatures a greater advantage. Demons can also stun enemies, opening up windows to finish them with a Torture Attack. Furthermore, each entity sports a special ability. Madama Butterfly blows kisses that charm enemies into fighting alongside you. Gomorrah bites targets, then tosses them airborne where you can follow up with an aerial attack. Demon Slave drains your magic meter, so you'll have to make quick work of your adversaries before it expires. Bayonetta can't move or attack while using Demon Slave but she can dodge, so you have to keep an eye on your surroundings to avoid taking cheap shots. Certain areas have special summoning circles granting unlimited magic use when activated, provided you are able to stay within its radius. Since this magic nullifies your dodge as well, taking advantage of it is easier said than done.

Another risk comes in the form of Demon Rampage. When your demonic companion takes damage, it raises its anger gauge. Filling this meter causes Bayonetta to lose control of the summoning, unleashing the demon on a wild stampede where it indiscriminately attacks anyone and anything. Demons can also be killed in battle, rendering them unavailable for use for a temporary period.

With these factors in mind, I found the best tactic was strategically incorporating Demon Slave into Bayonetta's standard combos. Executing long offensive strings and mixing in some Gomorrah chomps feels good, though the large size of these creatures means they occupy a lot of real estate on the screen. I needed to rotate the camera regularly to keep Bayonetta in view to avoid being hit off-screen while I steered the demon, so the mechanic does take getting used to.

After finishing the last Homunculi, I collect the currency they drop, called Embryos. The green fragments replace Halos as the game's primary form of money. Halos are still present, but they're now a rare commodity obtained through special means. Platinum isn't speaking on whether players will still battle angels and demons in Bayonetta 3, but the game establishes that angels appear few and far between these days, making me wonder how the multiversal crisis has affected the heavenly plane of Paradiso. Embryos and Halos are spent at the Gates of Hell. Platinum won't reveal the rewards tied to Halos, but Embryos unlock consumables, accessories, and upgrade items.

Bayonetta or Young Cereza?

Bayonetta's new braided hairstyle resembles that of Cereza, the little girl who tagged along in the first game. That adventure revealed Cereza as the child version of Bayonetta, plucked from the past by their father, Baldur, and brought into the present. When she's returned to her proper timeline, this creates a parallel universe where Cereza, now having experienced the love and bravery of her older self, is never sealed away by Jeanne and fights back when the Umbra Witches are purged years later. Thus, fans have speculated that the witch we're playing in Bayonetta 3 is this alternate version of Cereza and not "prime" Bayonetta. So which witch are we getting? When we asked director Yusuke Miyata, he was cagey about giving an answer.

"I can neither confirm nor deny whether this is a grown-up version of Cereza." says Miyata. "Since this game involves the multiverse concept, she could be Bayonetta from an alternate universe who happens to look just like Cereza, or it could be the grown-up Cereza. I'd like to leave this up to players' imaginations as they enjoy the game."

In a convenient shift for the series, Bayonetta 3 features traditional skill trees. Gone are the days when players had to lug Halos around until they found a portal to Rodin's bar; skill trees are accessible through the menu, meaning you can upgrade Bayonetta whenever you want. Spending Orbs, another new collectible earned during the post-combat encounter report card, unlocks new moves. Demons have their own ability trees too, expanding their capabilities for Demon Masquerade/Slave and creating a plethora of potential combat combinations.

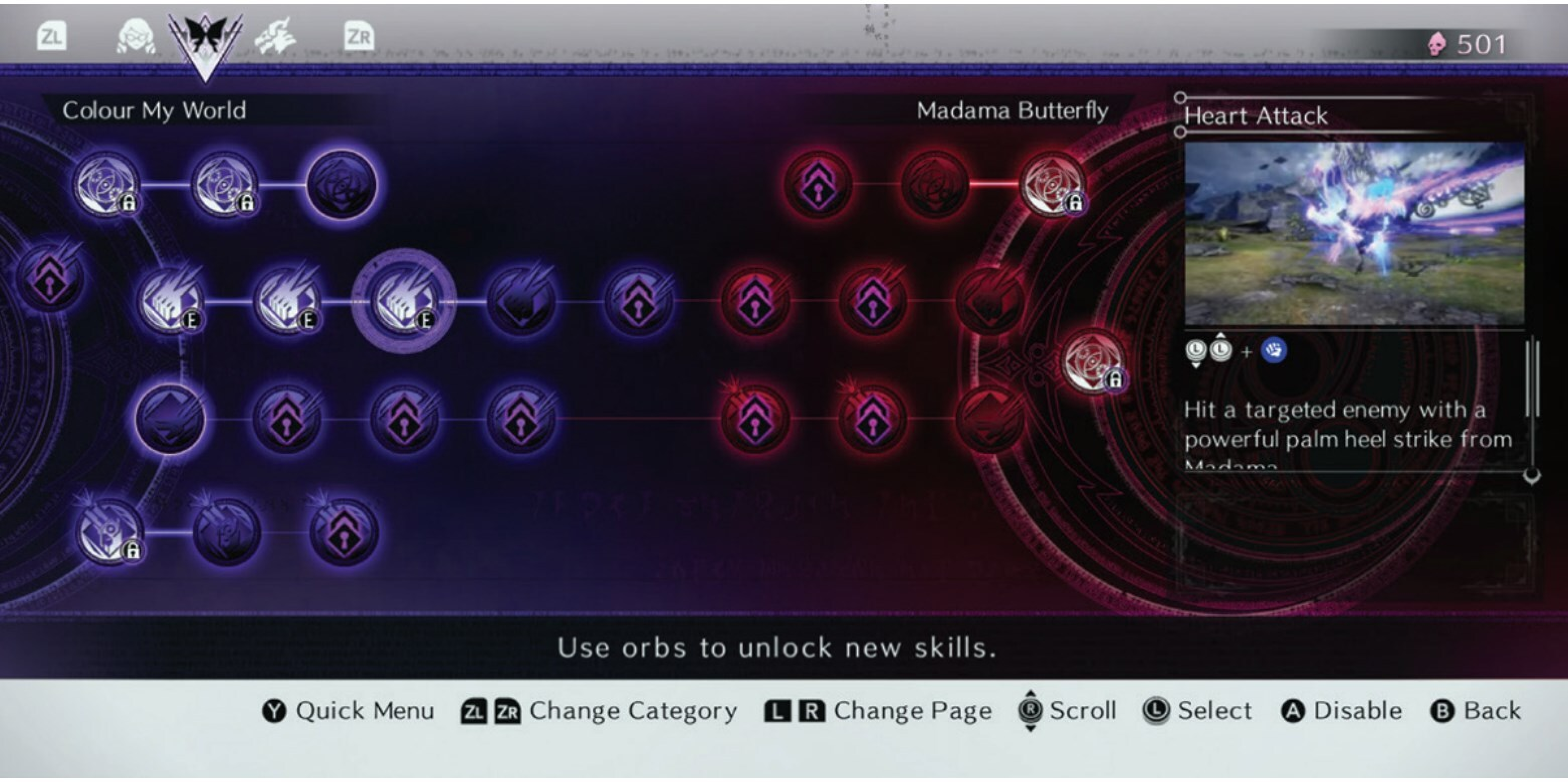
"Compared to the previous games, this game hosts a far greater number of skills," says Miyata. "In addition to skills linked to Bayonetta's weapons, each Infernal Demon has its own unique skills, and just adding those up gives you more than ten times the number of skills compared to the previous games."

With so many options at your disposal, the skill tree allows you to equip as many moves as you wish. You can also unassign abilities. This essentially allows you to make Bayonetta's moveset as robust or as simplified as you see fit.

Platinum wants to ease players into Bayonetta's intricacies better. For example, Torture Attacks won't be available from the start, unlocking as you play. Don't worry, veterans; you'll be tossing enemies into iron maidens sooner than you think. But Platinum wants to ensure newcomers or rusty players aren't overwhelmed by Bayonetta's numerous talents from the get-go.

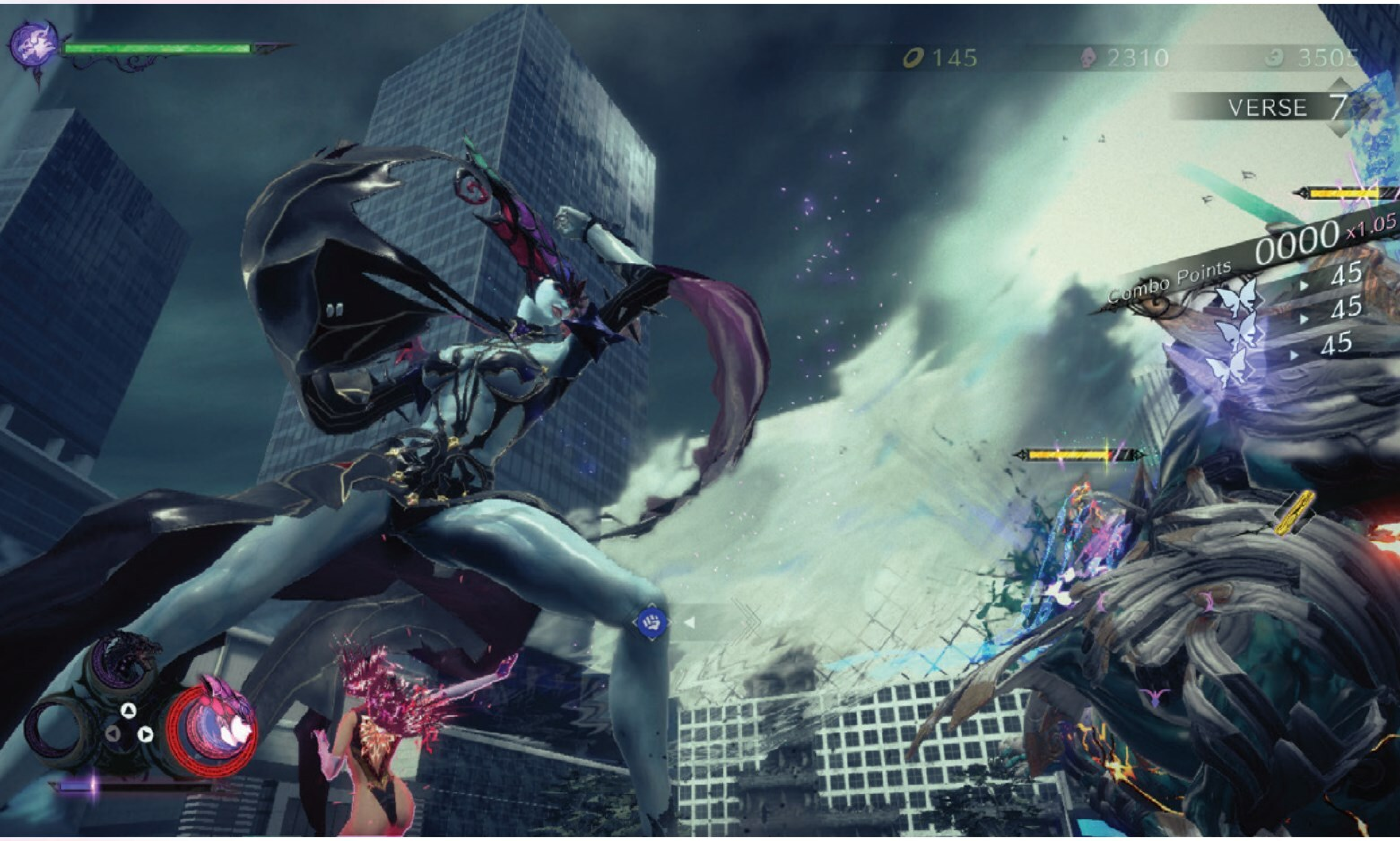
Bayonetta 3's revamped level design provides another avenue to show off your demon-summoning prowess. The larger levels pack even more secrets, many of which are only discovered with the help of your demons.

"There are places that Infernal Demons can be used to destroy things and solve puzzles scattered throughout the stages," says Miyata. "We've also created areas that can be conquered using the unique methods of traversal afforded by Demon Masquerade abilities, adding a degree of satisfaction to exploration."



Hit a targeted enemy with a powerful palm heel strike from Madama

Use orbs to unlock new skills.



Miyata wants to keep the new exploration features a secret, but did discuss Familiars. Fans likely remember sneaking up on crows to get precious Umbran Tears in past games. This challenge returns, but now cats and frogs carry them too. Familiars run and/or hide in their own unique ways unless approached correctly and collecting every Umbran Tear in a stage unlocks a secret level. Miyata described this unlockable stage as some sort of challenge divorced from the narrative, though it will feature some familiar faces. Clearing the area bestows a mysterious special item.

If you get sidetracked searching for goodies, clicking the left analog stick toggles a waypoint reorienting you towards the critical path. A destructive fog called Eraser also surrounds the borders of each level. Narratively, this wispy barrier eats away at reality, illustrating the multiverse's instability. Functionally, it's a fancy version of invisible walls designed to keep players out of inaccessible zones; touching the Eraser damages Bayonetta.

I exit Ginnungagap and enter a brand-new universe. I'm deposited into a train car arriving at Tokyo's Shinagawa Station. Homunculi have hijacked this train, and I discover I'm unable to activate Demon Slave in smaller spaces. I dish out punishment the old-fashioned way, but it's not long before my battle literally goes off the rails as the car topples off the track and into the city below. Bayonetta effortlessly leaps away and summons Gomorrah to catch her. As we land on a rooftop, Gomorrah, in his full glory, is under my total command as I square off with an equally massive Homunculi.

The fight unfolds like a classic Godzilla showdown. I mash attack buttons to methodically bash my foe. In addition to throwing my scaly hands, I can also unleash fireballs. Though it's always cool to see giant monsters beating the snot out of each other, the action feels more lethargic than I would like. Thankfully, the foundation of our rooftop arena gives way, and I'm surfing down lanes atop my demon buddy as the district collapses all around me. This serves as a chaotic sliding segment as Bayonetta rides Gomorrah, dodging flying debris and taking bites out of enemies foolish enough to attempt to derail us. In a funny sequence, we plunge into a river and emerge with boats attached to the soles of Gomorrah's feet, acting as oversized skates. As Bayonetta safely lands in another area of Tokyo, my destructive romp through the city comes to an end as this part of the demo concludes.

THE PUNKY UPSTART

The demo jumps ahead several missions to a mountainous region of China, unfolding within the gape of a mountain volcano. It's here where players take control of Viola for the first time. Her task: retrieve Luka, Bayonetta's ally and womanizing journalist extraordinaire. For some reason, Luka appears out of sorts, obliviously bumbling his way across the magma-filled chasms as Viola clumsily gives chase.

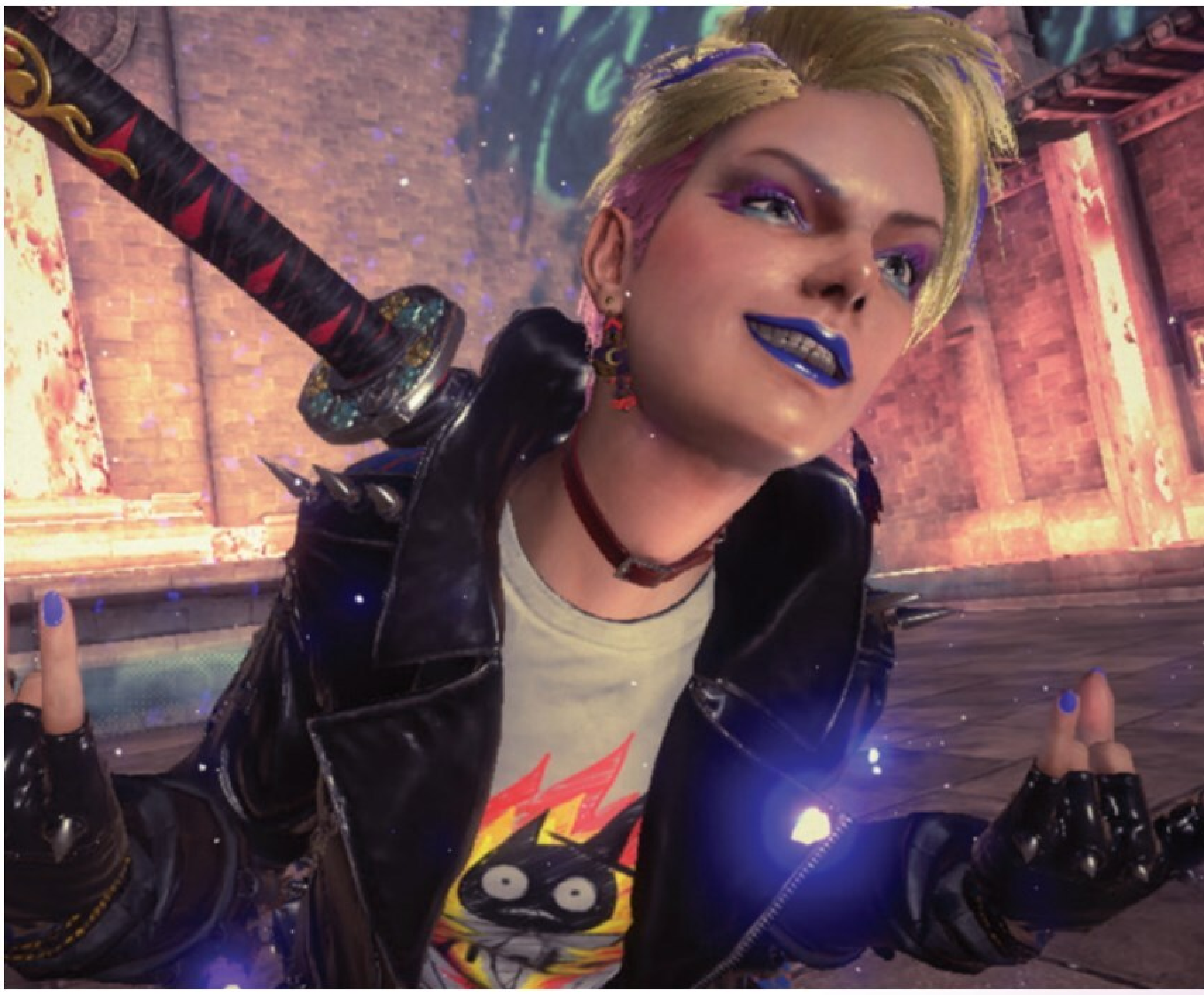
Viola isn't a full-fledged Umbra Witch, a fact her personality makes abundantly clear. She's vulgar, hot-headed, and aggressively punk rock. For example, she shatters combat barriers by throwing up devil horns instead of blowing cheeky kisses. That overwhelming 'tude may scare some fans into thinking she's Platinum's version of *The Simpson's* infamous Poochie, but she's softened by also being clumsy, uncertain, and scatterbrained.

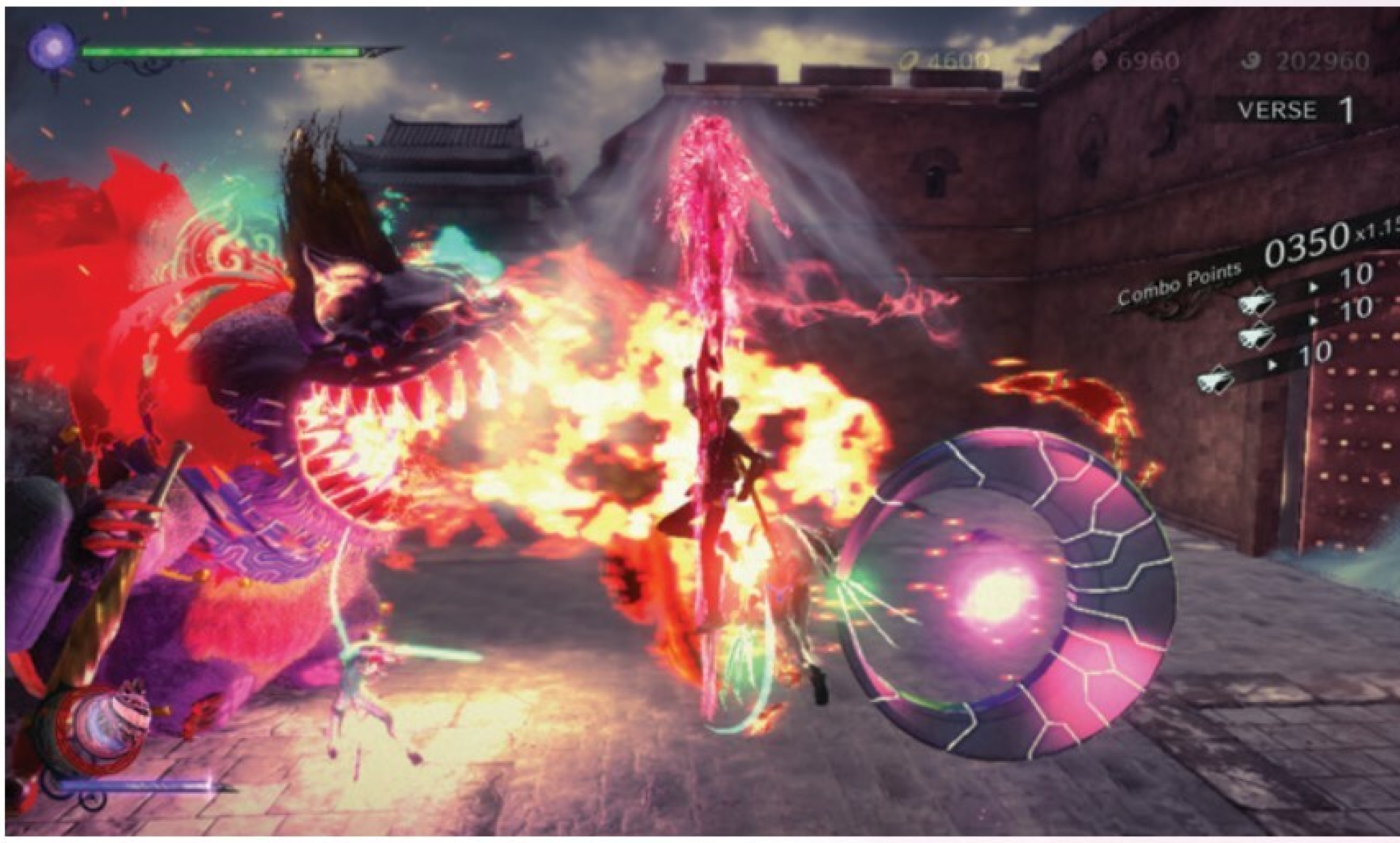
I get the sense that Viola's not always as cool as she may want to be. At one point, a pile of cannon balls becomes loose as the area gradually falls apart. Luka hops atop one of them to roll downhill. Viola, wanting to keep up and seeing no other option, awkwardly follows suit, leading to a humorous chase sequence as she struggles with maintaining her balance while dodging incoming debris. In short, Viola is a far cry from possessing the confident elegance that defines Bayonetta, and that's by design.

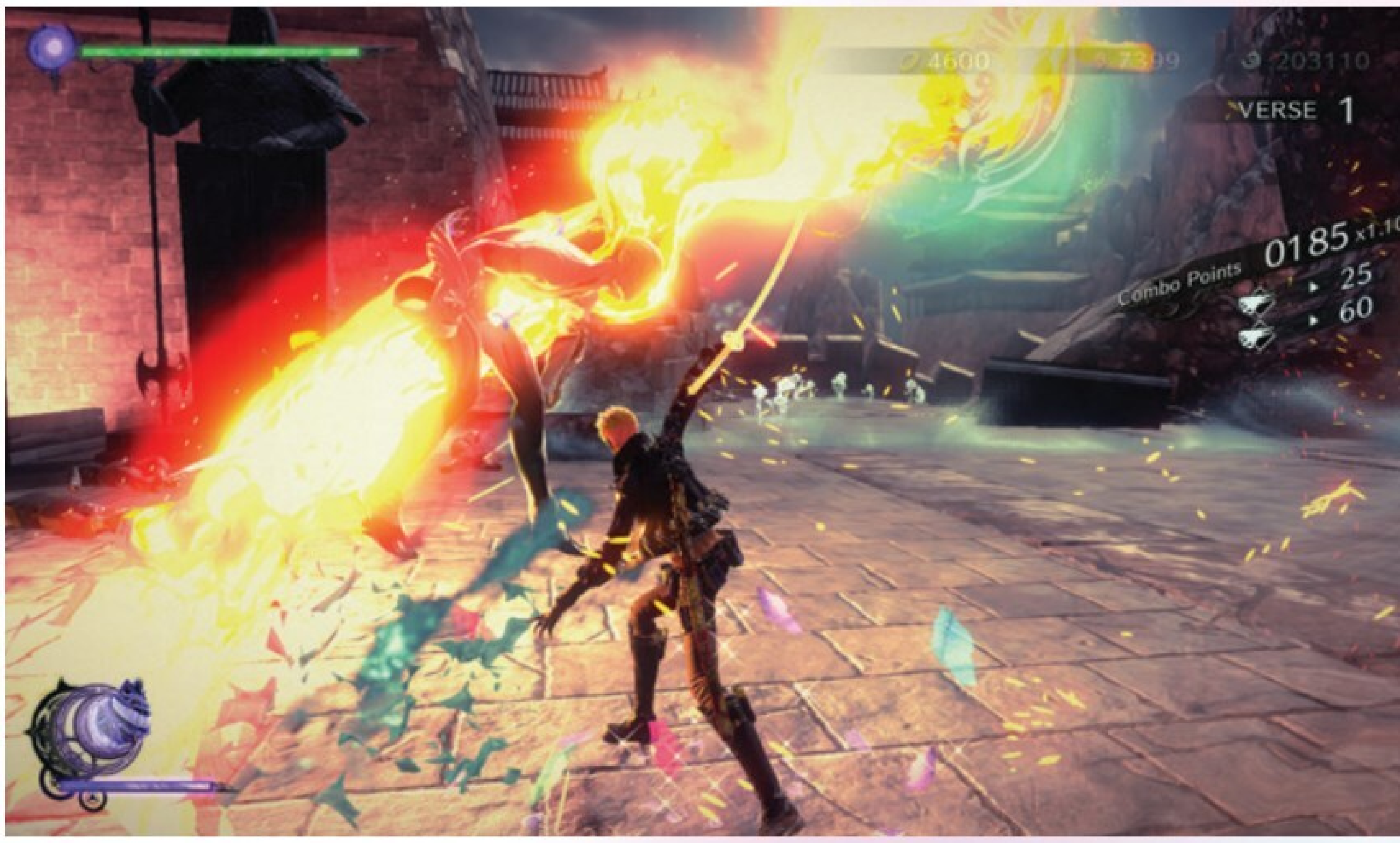
"Bayonetta is depicted as a perfect witch who possesses both strength and beauty, but when constructing a game or story, if you only have a perfect person, then there's no one to compare them to, and we thought the experience would become monotonous," explains Miyata. "By introducing the comparatively immature and imperfect Viola as another player in the story, we feel we were able to emphasize just how amazing Bayonetta is that much more, adding depth to the story."

That doesn't mean Viola only exists to reinforce Bayonetta's greatness. She plays a central role in the plot, serving as the catalyst for the game's events. As to what that means exactly, Platinum wants players to find out for themselves.

Viola sports a vastly different playstyle that reflects her inexperience. Instead of being adept at using a variety of weapons like Bayonetta, Viola only uses her katana and throwing darts. She also summons Cheshire for backup. What she lacks in finesse, though, she makes up for with raw power.







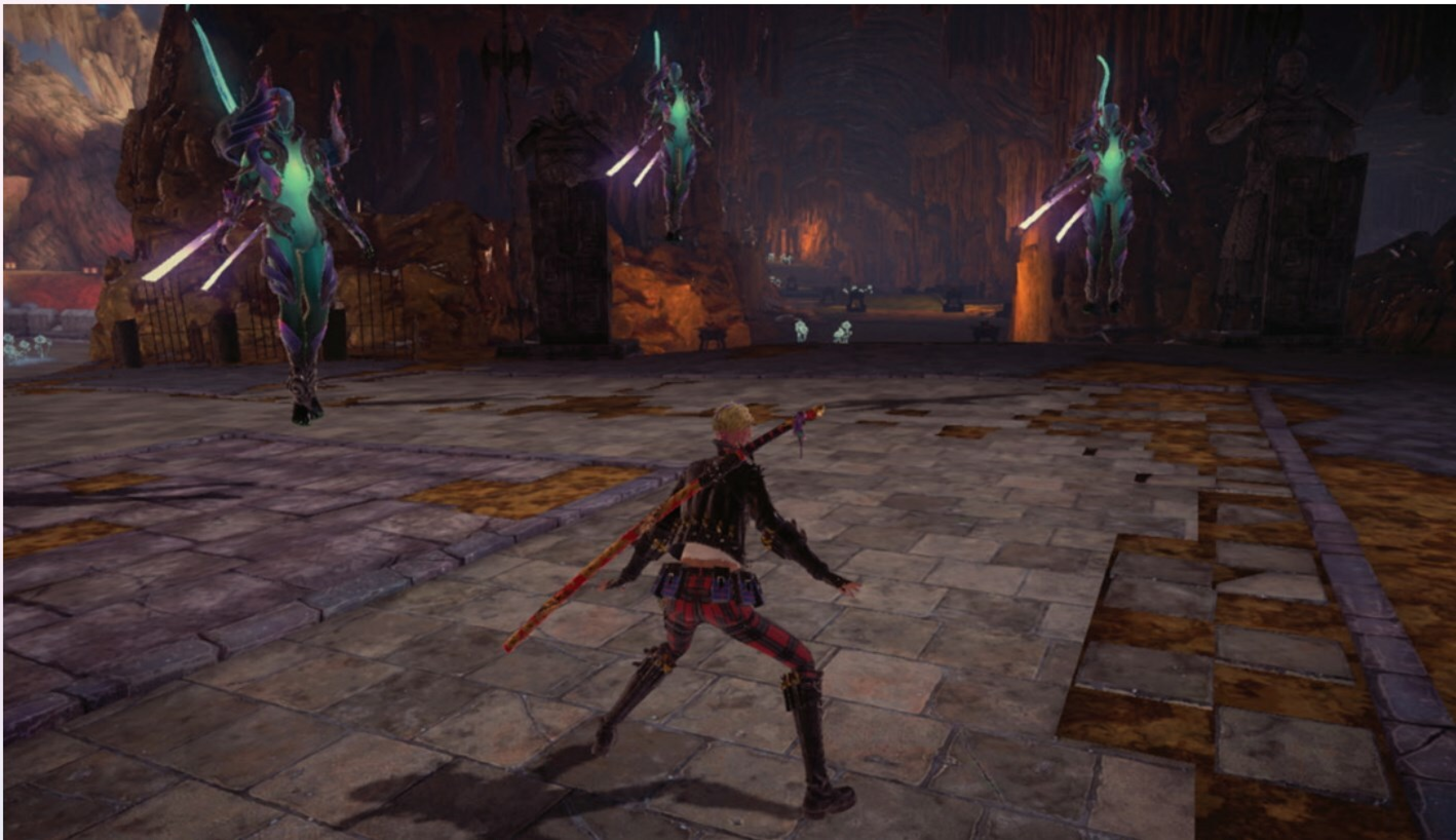
Playing as Viola, her style feels noticeably more deliberate. She's still quick, but her sword attacks feel more measured and, most of all, impactful. This approach tells me that Viola may not have the experience to hang in a drawn-out battle, so she focuses on hitting haymakers to quickly end encounters. Case in point: Holding the attack buttons charges her swings, engulfing her in a fiery aura that unleashes an explosive assault on the unlucky target.

Viola lacks her own set of guns – those are reserved for true Umbra Witches. Instead, she uses an unlimited supply of throwing darts to keep distant foes at bay. Naturally, you can't fire these off as quickly as bullets, so you have to be more tactical about when to toss them.

Like Bayonetta, Viola summons her demon companion Cheshire to fight alongside her. She accomplishes this by using the doll attached to her sword as the conduit for the summoning instead of her hair. The trade-off is that she has to disarm herself, something Miyata says requires a great degree of courage since she relies on her sword so heavily.

Viola's rookie status means she's less capable at using magic; she can conjure demons but can't control them. Thus, Cheshire behaves independently, swiping his large paws and going ballistic on whatever threat lies in front of him. As the Avengers learned when dealing with the Hulk, the best way to "control" Cheshire's onslaught is to point him towards a target and hope for the best. It's amusing watching this ridiculous-looking creature go to town on enemies. Plus, the benefit of not having to command Cheshire is that players can still fully control Viola. Although she has to fight bare-handed, tearing apart Homunculi alongside her demonic kitty is a blast, and Platinum says the pair are capable of dishing out more max damage than even Bayonetta.

Witch Time presents the biggest contrast between Viola and Bayonetta, one that will throw veteran players for a loop. Going back to Viola's emphasis on brute strength, she doesn't dodge to trigger the effect. Rather, you must block with your sword just before an attack lands. What will trip up fans – as it did me – is that blocking is mapped to the R button. Years of using Witch Time has trained



me to keep a finger hovering over the right trigger at all times, so I absorbed many punches to the face before I became (mostly) used to hitting the R button instead. Viola can still dodge, mind you; it just doesn't have an effect tied to it. The upside is that the timing window for Witch Time is more forgiving in Viola's case. If that doesn't work out, she can simply block attacks normally.

These traits, plus Viola's inability to use her hair to perform wicked weave attacks, initially made her feel basic in comparison to the flashier Bayonetta. But the more I played with her, the more I began to understand and appreciate the differences she brings to the table. Most exciting is that I only played the weakest version of Viola. Like Bayonetta, she sports a full skill tree, and I'm excited to see how her arsenal evolves throughout the adventure.

Though my time with Bayonetta 3 was relatively brief, I walked away impressed with the number of exciting and smart features Platinum has implemented. I have mild reservations about controlling Demon Slave during titanic monster smackdowns, but overall, it feels like a fun addition to an already winning formula. Viola brings a new brand of entertainment to the fray, exploration appears more involved in a good way, and the skill tree adds depth, flexibility, and convenience.

"For Bayonetta 3, we pulled out all the stops and jam-packed it full of everything we ever dreamed of," says Nakao. "...I think our fans will enjoy the game in a way that shatters their expectations – in a good way, of course!"

One of my biggest takeaways is that the game performs well on Switch. That shouldn't be a total surprise; the Switch ports of Bayonetta 1 and 2, though they are, admittedly, older titles, run at 60 frames-per-second, making them a blast to play on the go. Though I only played Bayonetta 3 while docked, the fact that Platinum has already worked with the hardware for years gives me confidence the experience will hold up. We'll see if that rings true, but I'm less wary than I was before the demo.

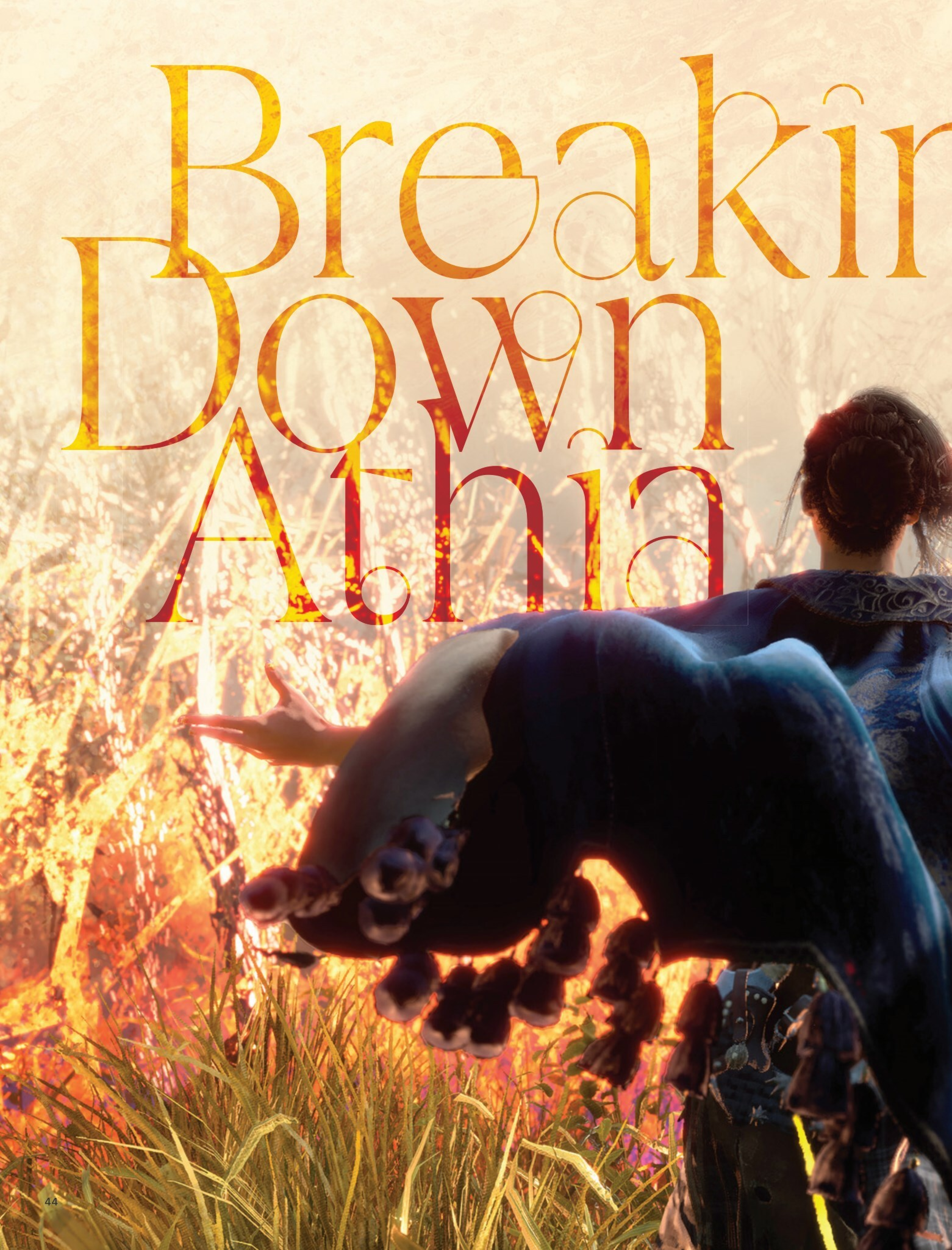
Most comforting is that this new entry, despite these big changes, still feels like a Bayonetta game. The tongue-in-cheek humor and innuendo, absurdly bonkers spectacle, and Bayonetta's alluring personality remain intact. After so many years of waiting (even before Bayonetta 3 was officially announced), it feels great to hang out with the classiest witch in video games for another stylish romp. And with the intriguing Viola tagging along, the more the merrier. Hopefully, Bayonetta 3 is more than worth the wait when it arrives at the end of this month. ■

To learn more about Bayonetta 3, head to GameInformer.com/Bayonetta3

About that First Trailer...

Now that we've seen what Bayonetta 3 looks like and have a strong sense of its premise, it brings into question the game's original reveal trailer. The cinematic showed Bayonetta, appearing as she did in the first game, battling a mysterious glowing entity and ostensibly losing. On its face, little about that first look seems representative of the final product, so I asked Platinum if that teaser still holds any narrative significance.

Supervising director Hideki Kamiya only offered small nugget. "One thing I can say is that the first trailer we released for Bayonetta 3 is also an important part of the game," he says. "It may be interesting to revisit this trailer after you finish playing through Bayonetta 3."



Breakin Down Athia

ng

LUMINOUS PRODUCTION HOPES STORY WILL DRIVE YOU THROUGH FORSPOKEN

BY ARON GARST

Corruption can be seen throughout Forspoken, bit by bit, as you explore its crevices. One elk-like creature, encountered early in my quest through Athia, only had spots of glowing coarseness over its' normal – albeit huge – body when I first encountered it.

It only seemed natural as I found more elk, named Illingoceros', that were more grotesque as I used parkour to dash through plains, mountains and dilapidated fortresses. This progression came to a head when I finally encountered a towering Altered Ilingoceros tucked into one of the corners of Athias. It was like fighting one of the humongous beasts within the forests of Monster Hunter.

Without even realizing it, I had seen the slow progression of the Break, a corruption that twists whatever creatures it touches, as it turned a familiar elk into a monster that had magical abilities that rivaled my own.

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Luminous Productions
RELEASE January 24

"We have other fantastical monsters, but the bulk of the enemies that Frey faces are animals like bears, elks or alligators," said Forspoken creative producer Raio Mitsuno. "Part of the reason we did that is to ground the expectation for what they should look like versus what they look like after they've been exposed to the Break so you can see the progression of their mutations."

That progression is at the very core of Forspoken. It's very much an open-world game designed to let you bounce around the world using magic parkour, but that exploration becomes more difficult – both gameplay-wise and narratively – as the game progresses due to the corruption that the player character is meant to stop. I experienced an hour of unencumbered gameplay in a custom-built demo of Forspoken at Square Enix's office in El Segundo, California, where I got hands-on time with the magical traversal, combat, and world.

"Beauty in cruelty," Mitsuno said while describing the overall experience of Forspoken. "That's one of the main themes in how it overtakes Athia. How it overtakes that world."

During this demo I explored the greenery and wreckage of Athia as Frey, the sassy main character who had been mysteriously transported from New York. A short tutorial taught me how to use two different sets of magic. Frey's magical abilities and a different set came from one of the game's antagonists – the formerly benevolent Tantas who rule over Athia.

I cut through several Zombie-like enemies before a fantasy playground opens up to me. I could go anywhere – with Ubisoft-like symbols filling the map in every direction – and play as I saw fit. The core mechanic allowing this is Forspoken's magic parkour.

"We really designed the open world and the land of Athia around being able to fully enjoy this parkour system," said Forspoken co-director Takefumi Terada through a translator. "Magic parkour is what we want players to look forward to."

Holding circle on my PS5 controller let me vault over boxes and walls in a seamless motion, as long as whatever was ahead of me was short enough for Frey to get over it with a wall jump. It was as seamless as controlling Assassin's Creed's Ezio Auditore da Firenze combined with the freedom that comes from Infamous Cole MacGrath and his electric abilities.

Movement and general traversal was the best part of Forspoken – which is clearly by design. The world was built to showcase this magical parkour system. Gliding around the edge of an old fortress, using a zip-line-like grapple to jump from one gigantic floating rock to another and negating hundreds of feet of fall damage with a simple dash made simply existing in Athia an enjoyable experience.

The combat, made up of at least a dozen different magical attacks in the demo, was an extension of that. Fighting hordes of weaklings to gigantic Elk and alligators was an exercise in learning to diversify my fighting while circling enemies with parkour.

"Instead of wielding weapons and swords and armor we wanted a game where you're using only magic," Mitsuno said. Near half of my spells were melee-based – with a

fiery red sword and spear making up some of my most used moves – making the distinction merely aesthetic.

The variety of abilities was impressive, and there were few limitations in what I could use at any given time outside a short cool-down timer. I could summon my own Zombie-like allies and floating swords to fight alongside me. I could throw ranged bolts, raise a fiery barricade around me and throw a giant molten bomb to stop enemies in their tracks. I never felt like I was overusing one ability, especially with Forspoken's Devil May Cry-like grading system judging my every move.

“The rating system takes into account how well the parkour was implemented,” Terada says. “Including what magic was used and if a weakness was taken advantage of.”

Moment-to-moment gameplay was like lightning. Vaulting over a horde of bow-wielding knights, firing a flurry of bolts, switching to my magic sword, and then dashing to get hits in up close only took a few seconds. I didn't feel as stylish as I did while controlling Dante or Nero in DMC, but I'm not convinced that wasn't due to my own lack of coordination.

The variety of combat scenarios was noticeable in the demo. I started my playtime by approaching a bridge filled with two dozen archers and ended by fighting a gigantic and mutated alligator who was stomping around some flatlands.

An hour isn't nearly enough time to decipher an open-world game like Forspoken – even if the slice I experienced was custom-made for this session – but I left feeling unsatisfied. Running around Athia at full speed felt fantastic, but had hardly any views, landmarks, or enemies that left an impact on me.

Every fort, ruin, or building I explored was the same brownish beige, every secret I unlocked was form-fitting enough to feel at home in most open world games, and I encountered the same enemies dozens of times. While there were some things I most certainly missed while playing, there was a lot that I had seen before.

The open world's depth will make or break Forspoken for many. Luminous Productions isn't designing a world players will be able to explore every inch of immediately; it's developing a gigantic world that's unlocked piecemeal as the story progresses.

“With Forspoken it is without a doubt a story-driven narrative,” Mitsuno said. “You're not given free space to open up right away. The world gradually opens up more and more. We're not giving the full world to the players from the very get-go.”

Luminous Productions is trying to direct the players on where to go. It's challenging to make that type of open world compelling, especially with what I've seen so far. Early areas won't even be fully explorable as some sections are blocked off until Frey unlocks specific abilities.

The depth of the world hinges on what we haven't seen from Forspoken yet – the story. The demo I played had no narrative elements within it. Nothing was explaining why I was fighting who I was fighting or what they were – outside the fact that the Break had corrupted them. The dialogue didn't keep me invested in the world, either, as the same quips grew old quickly.

“How many do you think there are,” Cuff, my magical sentient bracelet would say with a British accent as we approached any group of enemies, before Frey answered: “Enough for a party.”

It's hard to see how the rest of Forspoken will materialize. Mitsuno hinted at more areas that were more corrupted by the Break that would offer new opportunities for combat and parkour. Some bits did excite me, including the towering, corrupted elk that killed me multiple times in a colossal boss fight.

The project is ambitious, without a doubt, but it feels like it came together like Athia is supposed to come together as you play it – piecemeal.

“Initially, we wanted to create a brand new IP that is very original,” Mitsuno said. “From there on we decided to do a fish-out-of-water story and have this girl get tossed into a fantasy world and go on an amazing journey. One aspect of that we thought would make it even better is make Frey only be able to use magic. That's where our idea originally started from.”

I got the impression that there were many elements at the core of Forspoken, both during the interview and the hands-on demo. Parkour, magical abilities, and a narrative driven experience were all mentioned – but it's hard for these elements to co-exist at the center of the experience.

The magic parkour was fantastic, but it doesn't feel like it's at the center of the game if I'm not given free roam to explore however I please. Being told where to go – especially as roadblocks are put up throughout the journey – doesn't make for a compelling open world. It remains to be seen if the final complete experience will offer that freedom and transform Forspoken into something truly magical. ■

BACK TO BASIM AND BASICS

HOW UBISOFT IS RETURNING TO ITS ROOTS WITH ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

Ubisoft has officially unveiled Assassin's Creed Mirage, the next mainline game in the long-running series, following multiple leaks that confirmed almost everything the company formally said during a September Ubisoft Forward. And yet, everything Ubisoft revealed, even if it all leaked beforehand, still left me incredibly excited. Yes, using a younger version of Basim Ibn Ishaq, a significant character in Assassin's Creed Valhalla, as the protagonist sounds excellent, as does exploring an ultra-dense Baghdad during its Golden Age. But what has captured my attention most as it relates to Mirage is that it's not a massive and sprawling open-world RPG. Ubisoft isn't filling it with multicolored loot, dozens of questlines to keep track of, or a skill tree with hundreds of options.

In other words, it won't be Assassin's Creed Origins, Odyssey, or Valhalla. Instead, expect a return to the roots of this series; a return to the days where your main pillars of gameplay were stealth, parkour, and of course, assassination, rather than dialogue choices, side quests, and 80 hours of story to play through. Inspired heavily by Altaïr's adventure in the first Assassin's Creed but taking a little bit of something from every game, Mirage will be a reminder of the series' beginnings. And I can't wait. I spoke to the game's lead producer, Fabian Salomon, about why now was the perfect time to return to the franchise's origins, how Mirage will play, and more.

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** Action **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Bordeaux **RELEASE** 2023

"At the time, Baghdad was the biggest city in the center of the world for merchants, scientists, and art," Salomon tells me. "It was in the middle of the Silk Road...and it will look amazing. We also want to get the sense of coming back to a dense city like we did in previous Assassin's Creed games. We focused the gameplay on these elements ... we wanted to come back to the roots of the franchise."

Returning to Assassin's Creed's roots meant refocusing on what made the series great in the first place. In 861, when this game takes place, Baghdad's cultural importance made it an area rich in diversity that allowed scientists to share discoveries, artists to share styles, and scholars to share learnings. Divided by four districts, including the industrial Karkh and the lush gardens of Round City, the people of Baghdad inform Basim's knowledge of the area, as does the city's tangible denseness. Unlike the larger open-world RPG Assassin's Creed games, Basim can't just scale a mountain to traverse new parts of the map. He'll need to parkour atop Baghdad rooftops, utilizing new moves like the pole vault and returning favorites like the corner swing. The dev teams says both feel smooth smooth and fluid thanks to new parkour-specific animations, too. Basim also needs to sneak through large crowds by blending in, causing distractions, and finding new and optimized paths to reach destinations as quickly as possible. Salomon says Basim can still climb almost everything in the game, much like Bayek, Kassandra, and Eivor.

Part of the reason the team decided to return to Basim for Mirage's protagonist is that it allows them to explore his mysterious background. He's just a young street thief when we meet him in Mirage, plagued by nightmarish visions. He encounters the Hidden Ones, the organization that eventually becomes the Assassin Order, and it's there that mentor Roshan, voiced by Emmy-winning actress Shohreh Aghdashloo, takes him under her wing. Roshan helps Basim grow from thief to apprentice and, eventually, to the master assassin we met in Valhalla. The game reflects that growth in Basim's appearance – his robes, specifically – and what he can do as an assassin.

Salomon says Mirage doesn't feature a skill tree with hundreds of unlockable abilities and traits like Valhalla. Still, it does feature a progression of skill unlocks that coincide with Basim's rank in the Hidden Ones organization. His journey begins with a hidden blade after saying goodbye to a finger or two, as was the tradition in this period of the fiction for the Hidden Ones. His arsenal grows to include blow darts, smoke bombs, mines, throwing knives, noisemakers, and more.

How you use these tools is up to you, especially in one of the returning highlights: black box missions. First seen in Assassin's Creed Unity, these missions give you some of the open-endedness that Origins, Odyssey, and Valhalla gave players.

For the uninitiated, a black box mission is unique within Assassin's Creed because it allows the player to control exactly how they make a kill. Whereas other missions might set you up to kill a target at a specific location in a particular way, black box missions allow you to set up surveillance, learn about your target and their whereabouts, and discover unique and optimized routes to kill them. You could also ignore all the investigative possibilities and opt for a more in-your-face approach. The fun in these missions is that it's up to you.

"The structure of the game is really based on the Assassin's Bureau," Salomon says. "You already experienced this in the first AC so it's once again like fan service stuff so we really put the emphasis on this. It will be a hub for getting missions, progression in the story, and we really wanted to bring back black box missions. They really support all the methods to kill. We thought it was very interesting to have this gameplay back. We took inspiration from Assassin's Creed Unity but also the black box you maybe experienced if you played the Siege of

Paris expansion from Assassin's Creed Valhalla."

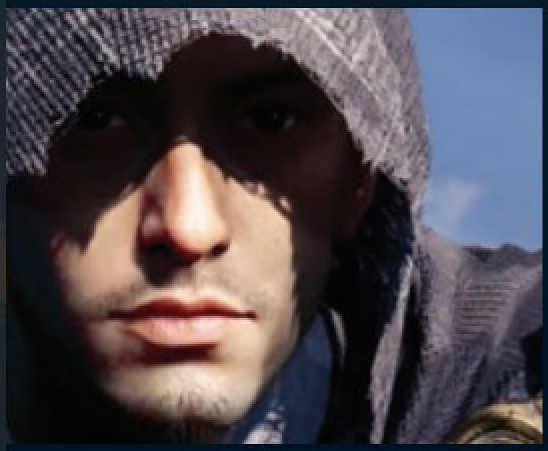
These black box missions play heavily into the "assassination" pillar of Mirage's return to form. Salomon says the team wanted to bring back the flavor of assassinations present in the first Assassin's Creed. Rafiq at the Assassin's Bureau would give you your next target in that game. A similar structure exists in Mirage with the Hidden Ones' in-construction Alamut Castle, a Persian fortress in the extended lore making its first in-game appearance here. After picking up a target assignment, you might scope an area out using Enkidu, your Aquila Heliaca eagle, who can provide an aerial view of a location and tag targets from above.

You need to be extra careful using Enkidu, though, because Baghdad is home to specialized archers who can take Enkidu down, temporarily eliminating your eyes in the sky. If this were part of a black box mission, you could choose to kill these archers first or opt not to, risking Enkidu. Regardless, stealthing through the streets of Baghdad and onto the rooftops where these archers might be more challenging than ever, thanks to a reworked detection system, new animation, and overall "more granularity" in stealth, according to Ubisoft. However, Basim has one tool in his assassin arsenal that could drastically shift the tides in his favor: the ability to slow down time. Plus, he can do this, target multiple people, and then perform a "quick-fire assassination" to kill them all at once in a flurry of blood, Ezio-like charisma, and Arno-like agility.

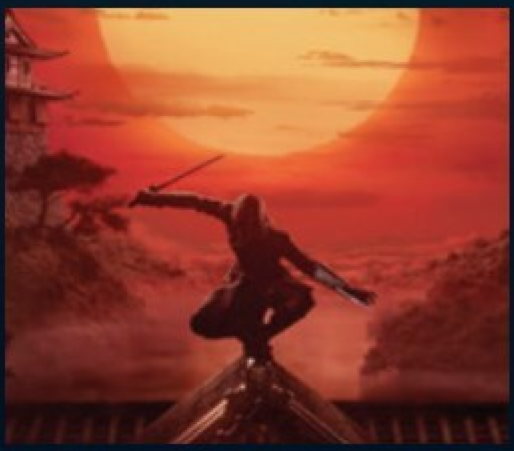
These three pillars – parkour, stealth, and assassination – are wrapped up in the most linear action-adventure Assassin's Creed story in years, Salomon says. He also says Mirage has a clear beginning and end, making it perfect for newcomers unfamiliar with Basim's journey in Valhalla but still rewarding for those who are. Unfortunately, he couldn't share too much more on the story of Mirage, but we'll learn soon enough because it will "come into the light," much like its protagonist, next year. ■

LEAPING INTO THE FUTURE

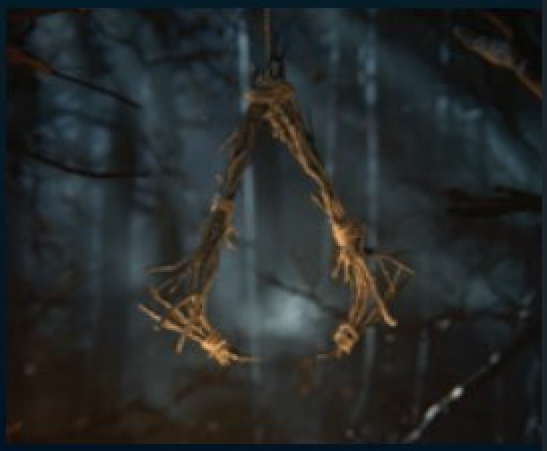
Mirage wasn't the only game announced during the September Ubisoft Forward. The company announced Assassin's Creed: Codename Jade, an open-world mobile game set in ancient China featuring the first assassin creator tool in the franchise, and Codename Red, the next premium flagship title for the franchise. Set in feudal Japan, Ubisoft revealed Codename Red through a short teaser and calls it the future of its open-world RPG games, giving players the ultimate "shinobi fantasy." Unlike previous releases, though, it will launch within Assassin's Creed Infinity, the company's upcoming live-service destination that's less a game and more a platform or portal for future Assassin's Creed experiences. Ubisoft also released a short teaser for Codename Hex, which gave me big witch-hunt vibes that feel more based on horror than any Assassin's Creed game before it. It will also launch within Infinity.



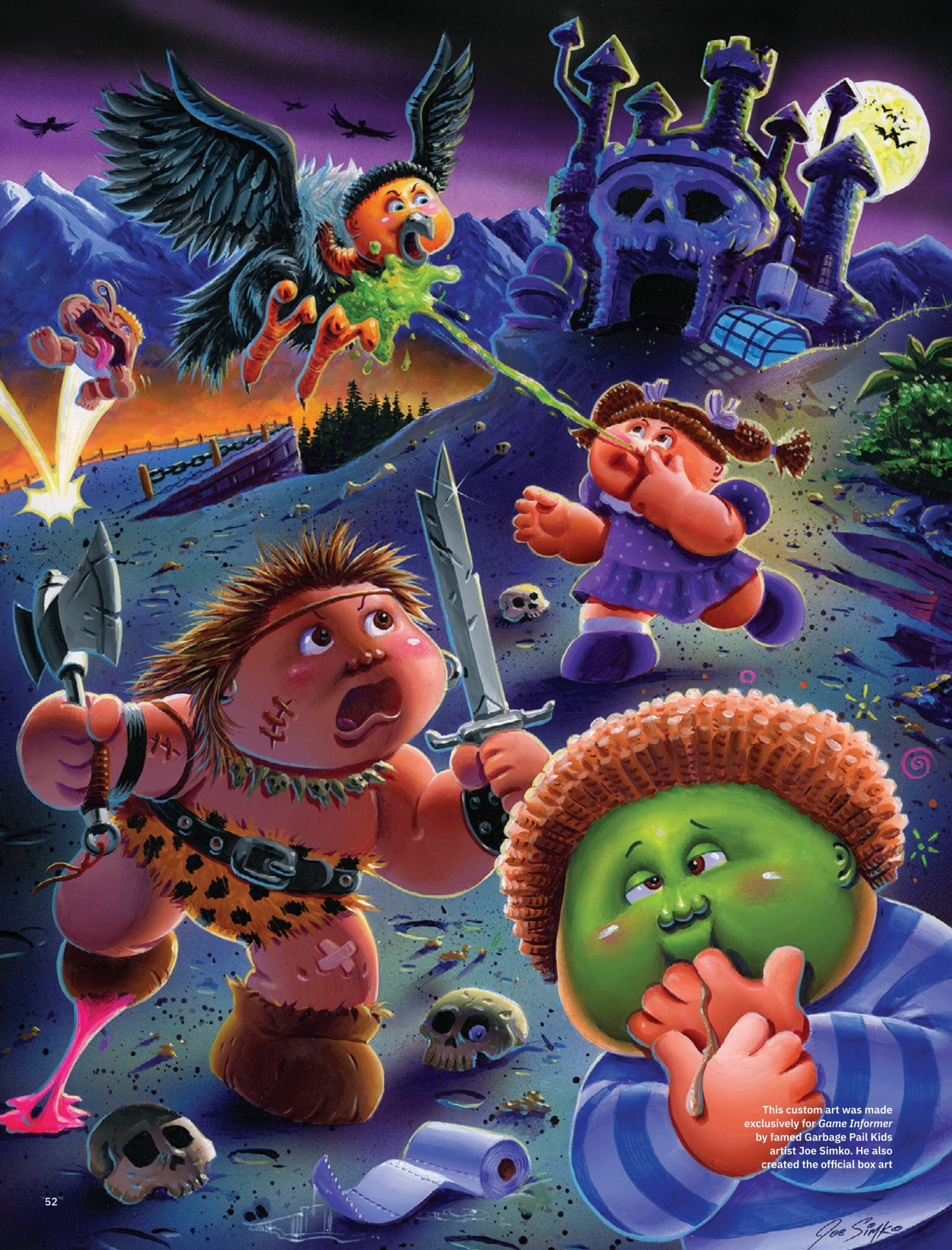
Codename Jade



Codename Red



Codename Hex



This custom art was made exclusively for *Game Informer* by famed Garbage Pail Kids artist Joe Simko. He also created the official box art

GARBAGE PAIL KIDS: MAD MIKE AND THE QUEST FOR STALE GUM

A REVOLTING RETURN

How a long-awaited Garbage Pail Kids NES game is finally coming to life **BY BRYAN VORE**

The year 1985 contained so many cultural touchstones: Queen's legendary Live Aid performance, Coca-Cola's infamous New Coke release, the first-ever WrestleMania, and much more. Likely the most crucial moment to readers of this magazine was the debut of the Nintendo Entertainment System.

The NES pulled the burgeoning industry out of the "video game crash" and introduced countless iconic characters and franchises. It seemed like every hit property received a game at the time. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Top Gun, DuckTales, Dungeons & Dragons, American Gladiators: the list goes on and on. However, one iconic brand shockingly never made the transition into a NES game.

Garbage Pail Kids, which also debuted in 1985, was a trading card series that mixed the cuteness of the hit Cabbage Patch Kids dolls with outrageous, funny, and compelling grossness. The images featured kids barfing, losing limbs, and getting zapped by lightning to name a few. Word of mouth spread on playgrounds like wildfire, and teachers and parents were quick to ban and condemn them. Naturally, this made GPK wildly popular.

The cards were such a hit that creator Topps produced 15 series in the span of three years. They licensed GPK out for toys, school notebooks and folders, inflatable punching bags, you name it. This kind of white-hot success would normally lead to an NES game as the logical next step, but several factors would get in the way.

A universally reviled live-action movie disappointed the kids who were allowed to see it. A threatened boycott got CBS to shelve a GPK Saturday morning cartoon that it had already fully produced. Most damaging of all, Topps had to settle with the makers of Cabbage Patch Kids for millions of dollars plus royalties and alter the design of GPK to be less like CPK's dolls. Sales dwindled and GPK was officially dead by the end of 1988.

After a long hiatus, Topps launched GPK's "All New Series" in 2003 (new GPK series continue to this day) during the era of PlayStation 2. The opportunity to create a GPK game on the classic NES console that shared its cultural heyday was seemingly lost forever.

PLAYABLE CHARACTERS

MAD MIKE

The titular character, Mike uses a sword and axe for melee attacks

LUKE PUKE

He's gonna puke! Luke's downward-firing barf takes care of enemies on lower platforms

LEAKY LINDSAY

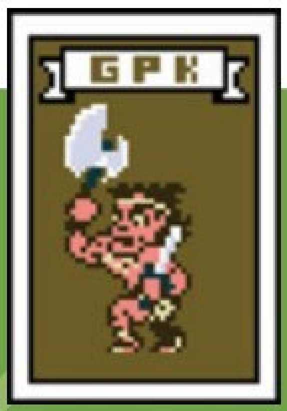
Lindsay's horizontal snot rockets provide much-needed ranged attacks

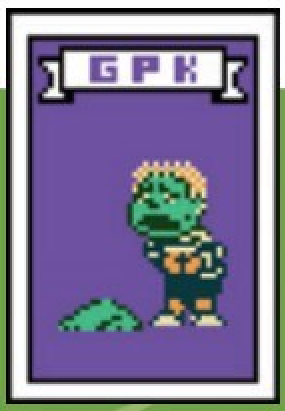
PATTY PUTTY

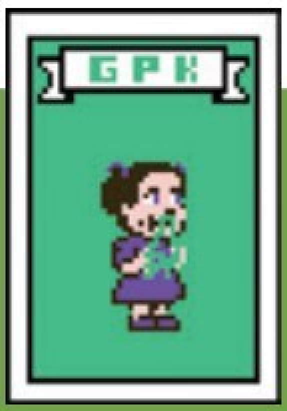
Think of her as the Luigi of the group. Higher jumps and head stomps play more like a Mario Bros. game

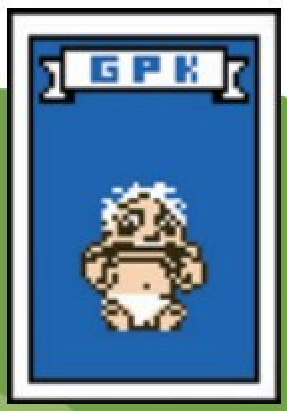
---

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC • NES
STYLE 1-Player Platforming **PUBLISHER** iam8bit Presents **DEVELOPER** Retrotainment, Digital Eclipse
RELEASE October 25 (digital), Q1 2023 (NES cart)









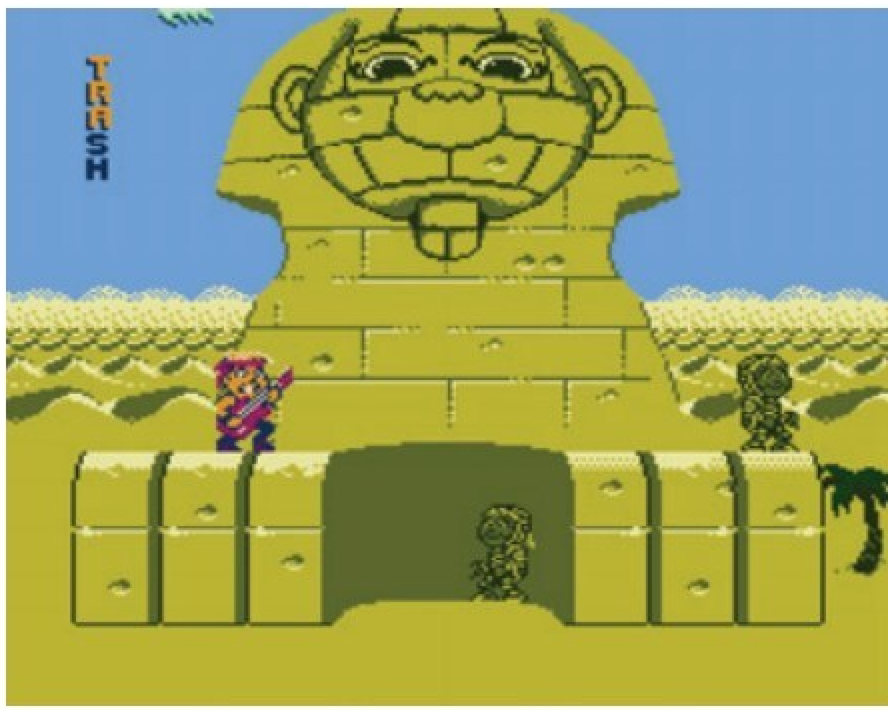
ADAM F. GOLDBERG BRINGS THE STAR POWER

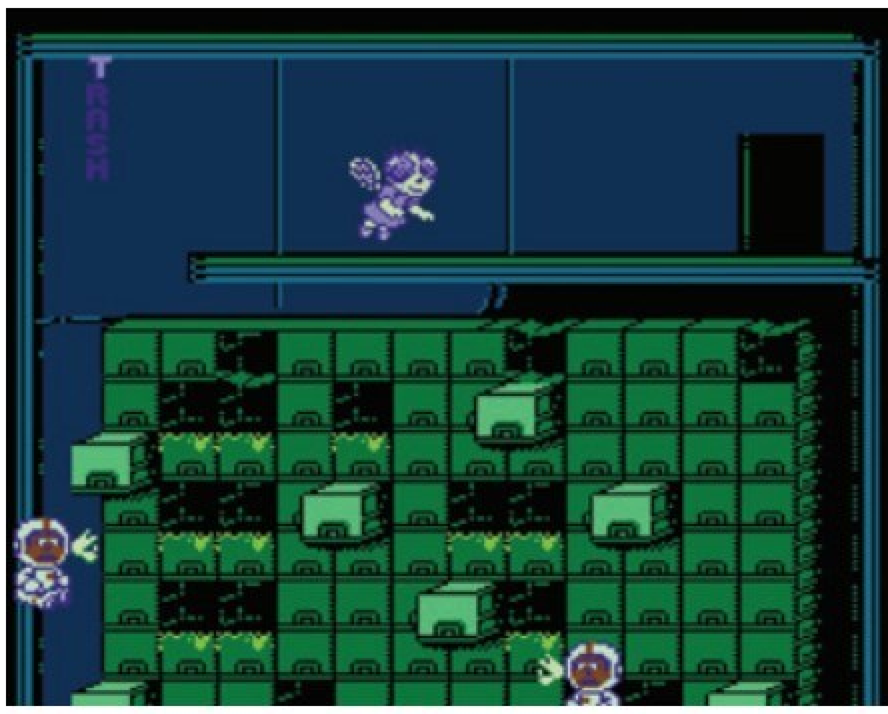
The creator of hit show *The Goldbergs*, Adam F. Goldberg, is a huge Garbage Pail Kids fan. He produced the documentary *30 Years of Garbage: The Garbage Pail Kids Story*, wrote the short film *Garbage Pail Kids in Mad Mike: Fury Load*, and worked on the story for *Mad Mike and the Quest for Stale Gum* with the game creators.

How did you get involved in Mad Mike: Fury Load?
My longtime dream has always been to create a GPK animated series, but my TV company is unfortunately at ABC, which prohibits me from working outside of Disney. However, I am allowed to write short films. Joe Simko's brilliant Garbage Pail Krashers vehicles were the perfect inspiration for me to create a Mad Max parody.

What interested you in contributing to this game?
I grew up loving two things above all else – my GPK collection and my Nintendo. Back then, there were rumors that GPK was going to be a NES game, Saturday morning cartoon, and a movie. The Nintendo game never came to be. It blows my mind that after 35 years we will finally get the 8-bit GPK adventure we were promised!

How was working with Retrotainment and iam8bit?
I had a blast collaborating with Retrotainment and iam8bit at the early writing stages. They truly did a brilliant job using *Mad Mike: Fury Load* as the framework for the game – but made it more epic than I ever expected. It's a bucket list item for my name to scroll at the end credits 8-bit style!





LIFTING THE LID

Tim Hartman and Greg Caldwell have been best friends since the third grade. They connected over a shared love of NES games, Garbage Pail Kids, and many other '80s cultural touchstones. In their adult lives, they found themselves longing for an era of game that just wasn't made anymore.

They found a homebrew community where people were making new NES games in the same style and limitations of the original hardware. It wasn't long before they wanted in. But they had to do it right.

"For us, the cartridge comes first," Caldwell says. "This is where we got our start in game dev. We had never made a game before we made a NES game. That's always been paramount for us."

The friends pulled together a small team under the name Retrotainment to create Haunted: Halloween '85, a spooky action platformer, and worked with Infinite NES Lives to produce custom NES cart shells, boards, boxes, and manuals. The 2015 release was followed in the subsequent year by Haunted: Halloween '86. (Both games later released on digital platforms to reach a wider audience.)

While showing the games off at retro conventions, they caught the eye of art, music, and gaming collectible producers iam8bit. Retrotainment and Infinite NES Lives would go on to manufacture several NES, Super Nintendo, and Sega Genesis cart reissues for iam8bit, including classics like Street Fighter II, Mega Man 2, and Disney's Aladdin.

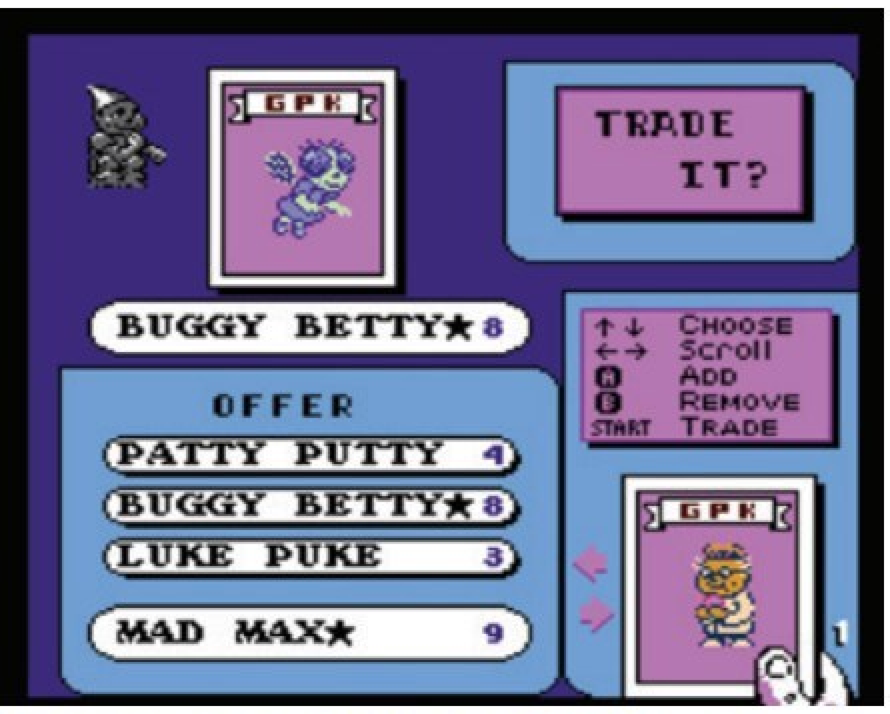
As they were working on all of these retro releases, they started thinking of all their favorite childhood things that never got the NES treatment. At the top of the list was Garbage Pail Kids.

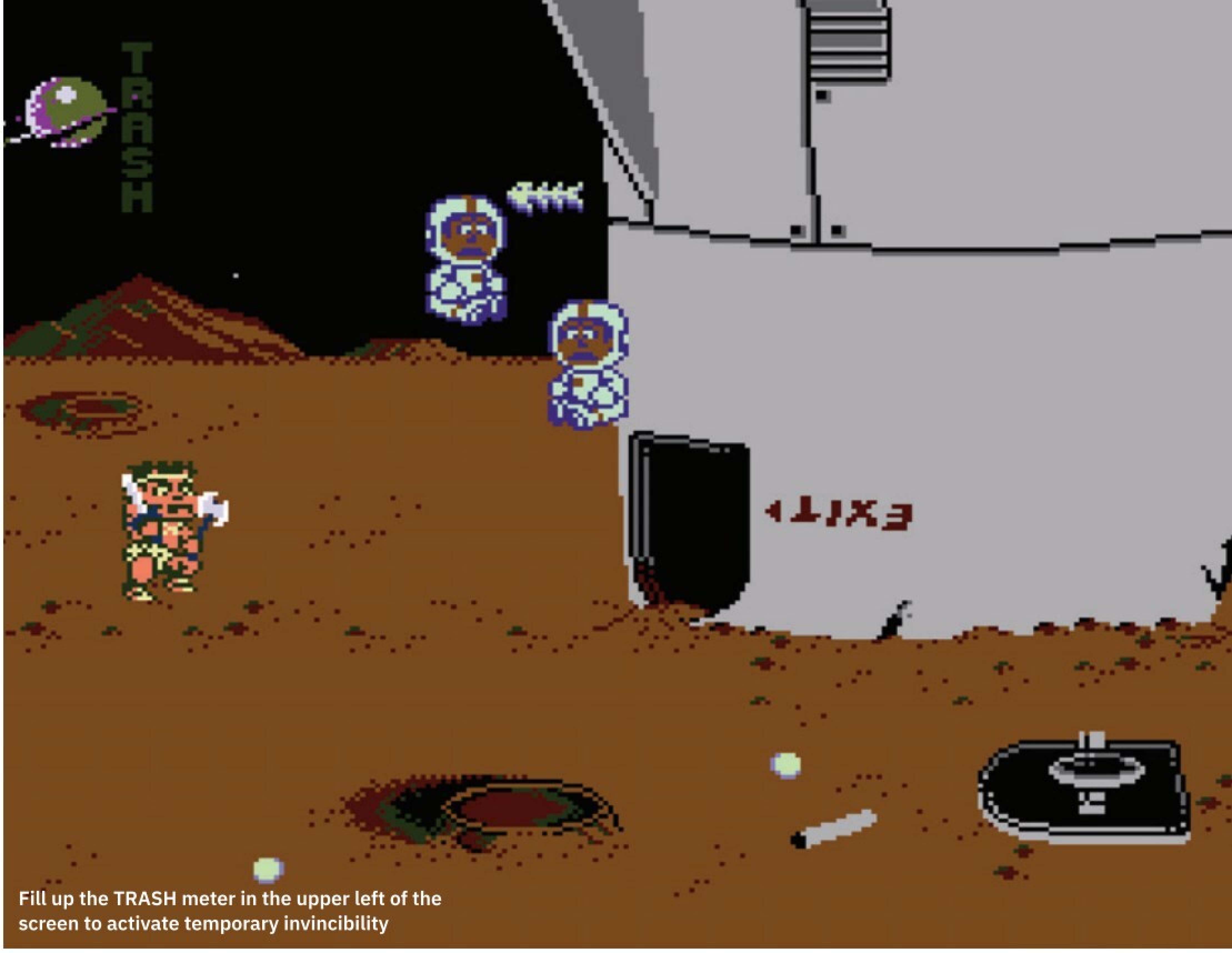
"We were trying to right a wrong," Hartman says. "It's the game that [GPK has] long deserved to have."

Hartman managed to work his way through contacts at licensor Topps, and eventually convinced the executives to give them a shot. Retrotainment brought this up with partners iam8bit, which recently announced it was getting into game publishing. The company was immediately onboard.

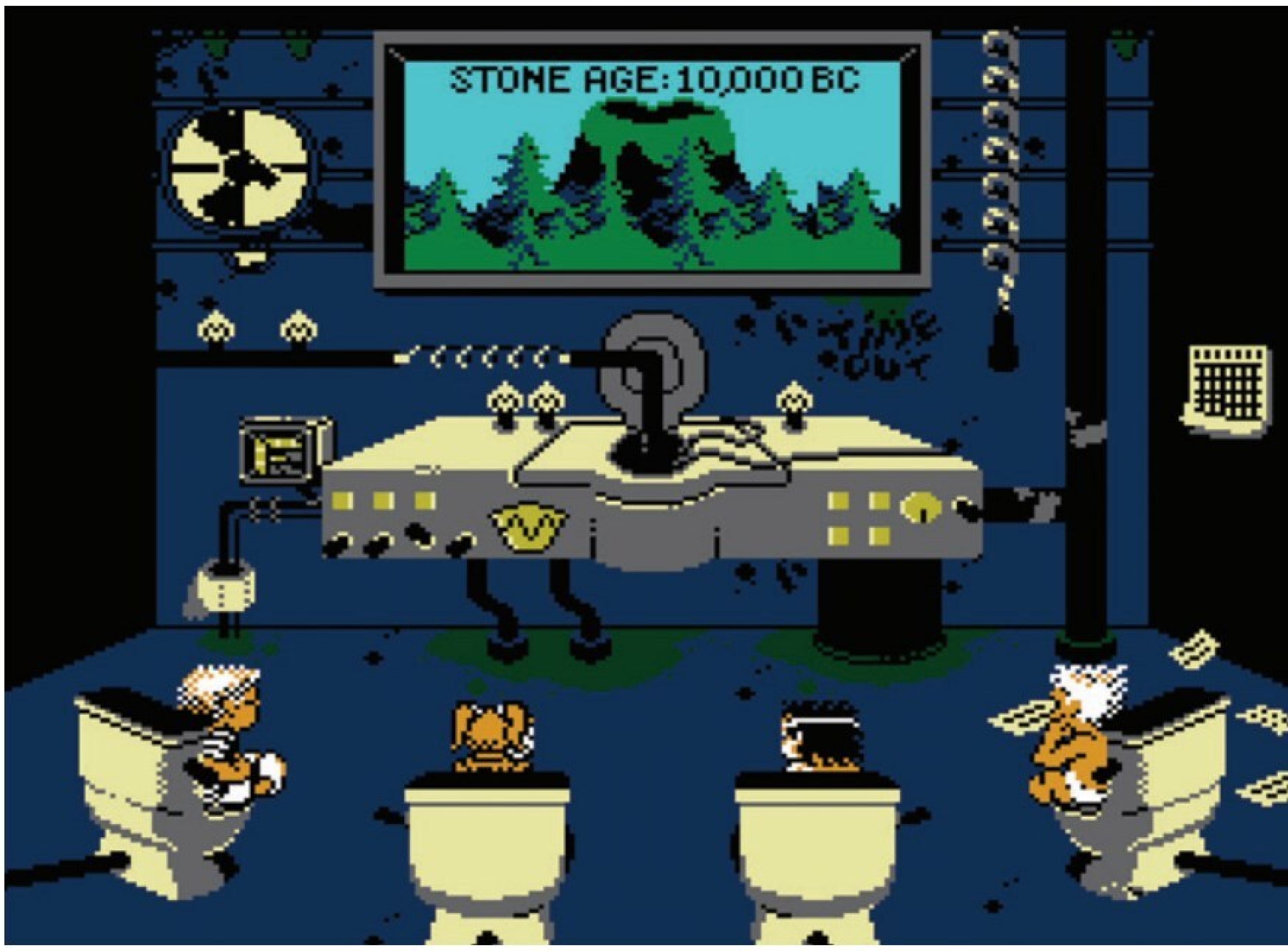
"When Garbage Pail Kids came up in conversation, it felt so great to all of us," says iam8bit co-owner Jon Gibson. "[It was like] yeah, why wasn't there a game?"

Garbage Pail Kids
Mad Mike
And the Quest for Stale Gum
iam8bit presents





Fill up the TRASH meter in the upper left of the screen to activate temporary invincibility



GARBAGE PAIL GAMEPLAY

Garbage Pail Kids: Mad Mike and the Quest for Stale Gum begins directly after the events of GPK *Mad Mike: Fury Load*, a series of shorts written by Adam F. Goldberg (see sidebar) set in a post-apocalyptic world. The titular character saved the day and now all he wants is his favorite stale gum. Unfortunately, the factory run by Brainy Janie only makes fresh gum so he'll have to travel through time and space with his three friends on a high-tech toilet to collect the ingredients to make it properly stale.

Mad Mike and his friends all have different abilities (see sidebar) and players can hot-swap between them to take advantage of their skills. The game's six different levels feature adventures in the Stone Age, '80s Tokyo, a future Mars colony, and more, and can be completed in any order.

Every enemy, boss, and NPC in the game is based on a real GPK card, all of which you can view in the bonus gallery in high resolution. Card collecting and trading is a key component, as some have powers like stunning enemies or granting temporary flight. If you track down all 39, you get a special surprise.

Minigames include fishing for items out of a porta-potty and flying around dangerous obstacles as Buggy Betty. The GPK irreverent, gross-out attitude runs through every element in the game.

Multiple difficulty options help players overcome the "NES hard" gameplay, and retro collection masters Digital Eclipse is on board to provide its signature rewind, save states, watch mode, video filter effects, bonus gallery content, and much more in the digital download versions of the game.

It's clear Retrotainment is pouring decades of pent-up ideas for a GPK NES game into this project, and that it hopes old-school fans and new players alike will find something to love.

"There are so many characters, so many opportunities for that brand to shine," Tim Hartman says. "We're very honored to be a part of it, and the history that is the Garbage Pail Kids." ■

CROSSING THE STREAMS

Hands-on with Ghostbusters: Spirits Unleashed, the asymmetrical 4v1 multiplayer game that tells a new canonical story

BY ANDREW REINER

The film *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* created a powerful new pulse for the beloved supernatural universe. With director Jason Reitman taking over for his father Ivan and the original cast reprising their roles, *Afterlife* had the heart and soul fans have been waiting for. That nostalgia paved a familiar path giving way to a new generation of characters and ideas. A sequel film is in active development, gaining the codename Firehouse, which implies the Ghostbusters will once again call New York City home.

The forthcoming video game Ghostbusters: Spirits Unleashed picks up that narrative thread and brings players to the Big Apple, where a new canonical story unfolds following the events of *Afterlife*. Dan Aykroyd and Ernie Hudson return as Ray Stantz and Winston Zeddemore, respectively. They communicate with the player and are often within the vicinity of the iconic firehouse, which has only changed a little since we last saw it in *Ghostbusters II*.

Developer IllFonic worked closely with Ghost Corps, the production company that handles all Ghostbusters projects, and even got the chance to pitch their game to a legend.

"Ghost Corps liked what we were doing with Predator and Friday the 13th but said we have to pitch it to Ivan [Reitman]," says Jared Gerritzen, Illfonic's head of design and creative. "We f---ed up our first pitch. We came in and focused on the wrong stuff. We had the full Ivan Reitman experience, to say the least. We returned two weeks later with the things he wanted to see, and he loved [the game]. In the end, he said, 'This is amazing.' We essentially storyboarded the game for him. He learned a lot about what video games can do these days. He was really into the idea of the player seeing from the ghost's perspective. As a childhood fan of Ghostbusters, it's been an amazing process to add to this space."

Ghostbusters is tailormade for IllFonic's asymmetrical gameplay design, but the four iconic characters from the films will never see battle in this game. The player creates their Ghostbuster character right down to picking the hairstyle, skin color, facial details, and fashion design of the eye-popping tan jumpsuit.

The customization unfolds within the firehouse, a fully explorable base of operations that also doubles as extreme fan service given the number of Easter eggs it holds from the movies. Upstairs you'll find a workbench you can use to upgrade your gear, and the basement has the containment unit you'll need to use after a successful ghost hunt. When you enter the alley, you can practice with your gear at a shooting gallery made of wooden ghosts. The building next to the firehouse also holds wonders. Within the golden light emitting from an open doorway, you'll find Ray's, an occult bookstore, where Ray continues to study the paranormal world.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (5-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** IllFonic
DEVELOPER IllFonic **RELEASE** October 18

Ray is always here with his head in a book or studying an artifact and will communicate with the player when approached.

Gerritzen says working with the original cast couldn't have gone better. "Dan [Aykroyd] entered the recording studio and was about 10 minutes into reading his lines, and he stopped and said something like, 'Guys, I have to tell you this: You knocked this out of the park. What I'm reading here is so tonally Ray.' He was super happy and added so much to the character. He was so cool and was happy to do this."

Ray's story continues through cinematic cutscenes and conversations the player unlocks by leveling up. IllFonic believes Spirits Unleashed holds more story than other asymmetrical games. Progression in games of this ilk is usually weapon or character upgrades – which the player also gets in this experience – but they also earn significant narrative rewards.

As for Winston, in *Afterlife*, we learned he was quite wealthy and had spent some of his money to purchase the firehouse and Ecto-1 with the intent of reviving the Ghostbusters. You are one of his recruits, and he will need your help as he undergoes further changes in this story. For spoiler's sake, Gerritzen won't reveal how Winston is developing but says Hudson brings a "doomsday voice" to the role. It surprised the IllFonic team that attended the voice recording session and is so commanding that Gerritzen believes it could land the actor a Star Wars bad guy role.

The story Spirits Unleashed tells is pretty short but should please Ghostbusters fans with how deeply it pulls from the existing lore. It will also push the player to throw on their proton pack as a Ghostbuster or perfect their sliming abilities as a ghost to level up to unlock the story's next chapter.

SPECIALS
CLOCK TOWER

Bustin' Ghosts

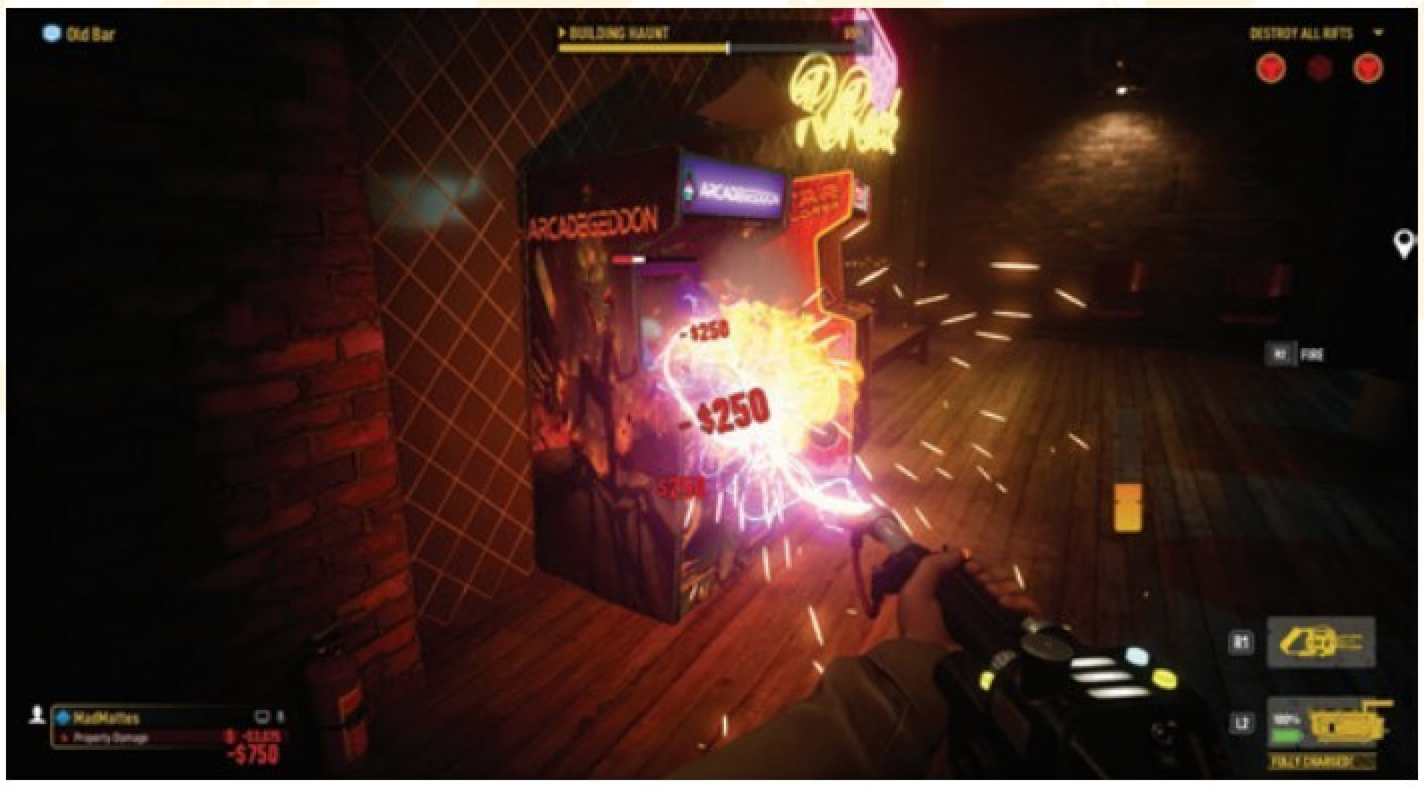
As I design my Ghostbuster, who I give a more modernized version of the jumpsuit with gray sleeves, the IllFonic developers with whom I'm playing inform me that each match lasts roughly 10 to 15 minutes. We don't need a complete party since A.I. characters will handle any openings. IllFonic cites these digital allies as one of the team's most significant additions after working on Predator. If a player drops from a party, an A.I. replacement will immediately fill the void. And if you don't want to play with any players, you can play Spirits Unleashed entirely offline with A.I. at your side and controlling the ghost.

A workbench on the firehouse's second floor shows me my loadout, which consists of the Ghostbusters basics: the proton pack, PKE meter, and ghost trap. As I level up, I can upgrade these items and obtain additional gear, such as a grappling hook and the remote-control car from *Afterlife*. Our group lead yells to me that I must come down to the Ecto-1 to start the match. I slide down a gold fireman's pole and am there within seconds.

We're heading to the abandoned Rock Island Prison to investigate a supposed haunting. This location is one of five awaiting players on launch day. The other levels are a lodge, museum, brewery, and cruise ship.

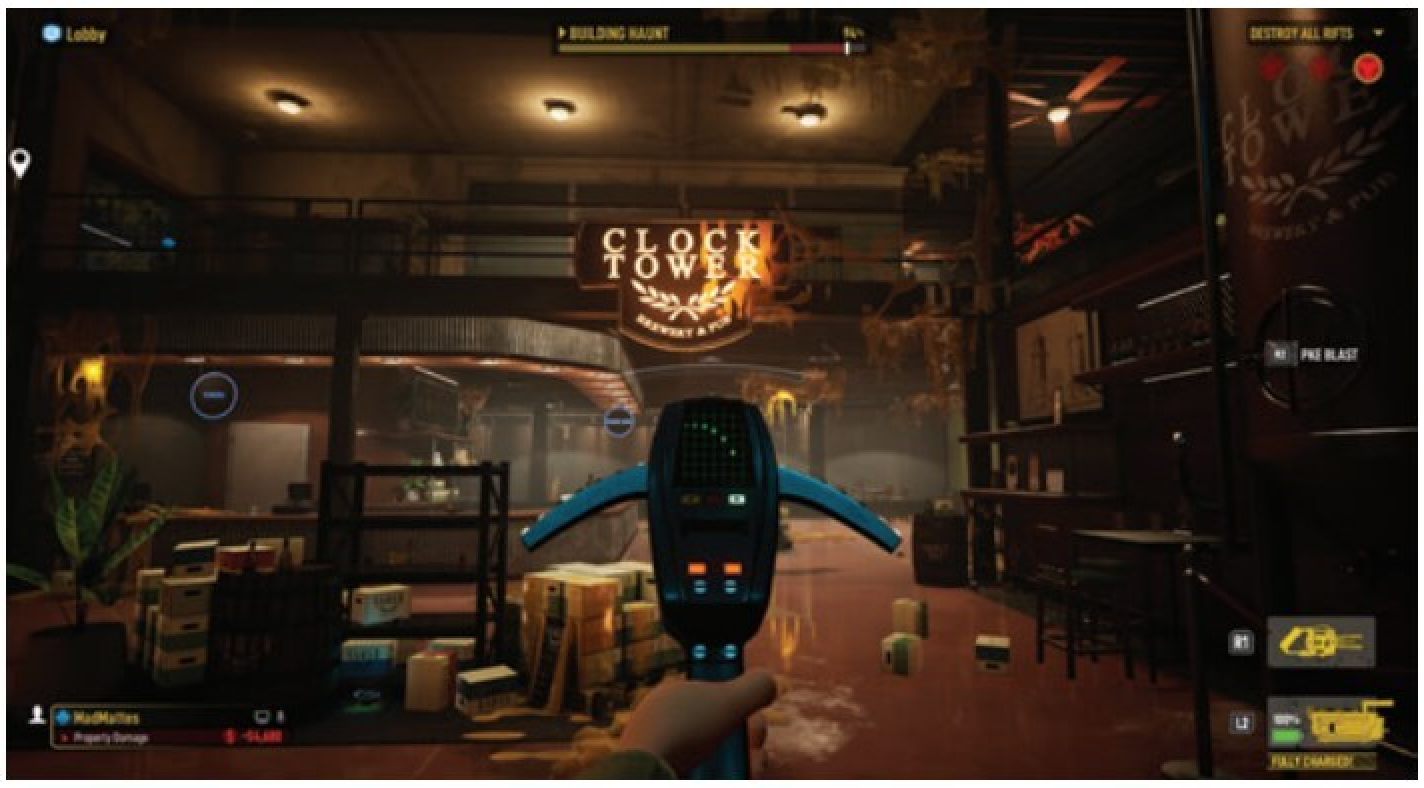
"We wanted to think of places that gamers could imagine having ghost activity, and that could truly be haunted," says Gerritzen. "Many of us have grown up with some form of a run-down haunted prison story told around campfires. This location was a must-include when coming up with maps."

The prison is somewhat in ruin yet is surprisingly well-lit and wide open, with cellblocks lining the walls of two floors and various common areas dispersed between them. My Ghostbusters crew wastes no time splitting up; all three of my cohorts immediately pull out their PKE meters to scan for supernatural phenomena. I pull mine out and chuckle at how



Old Bar
BUILDING HAUNT
DESTROY ALL RIFTS
ARCADEGEDDON
-$250
$250
MadMattes
-$750

Shipping
BUILDING HAUNT
DESTROY ALL RIFTS
MadMattes



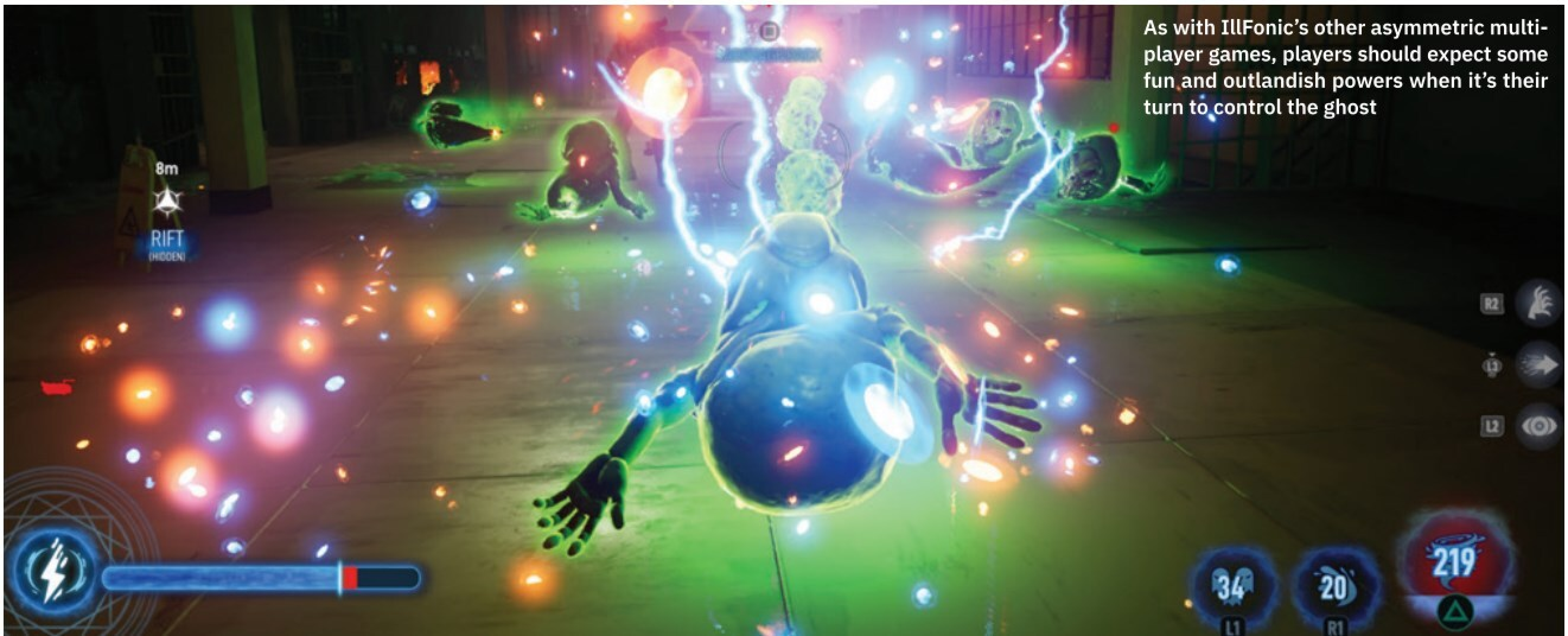
Lobby
BUILDING HAUNT
DESTROY ALL RIFTS
CLOCK TOWER
PKE BLAST
MadMattes

it screams of '80s sci-fi, with blinking lights telling me if I'm nearing something spooky.

My teammates inform me that the ghost is likely hiding yet will be on the move to accomplish its objective. The ghost needs to achieve a 100 percent haunting rating, and we must stop it from getting there. That's the game.

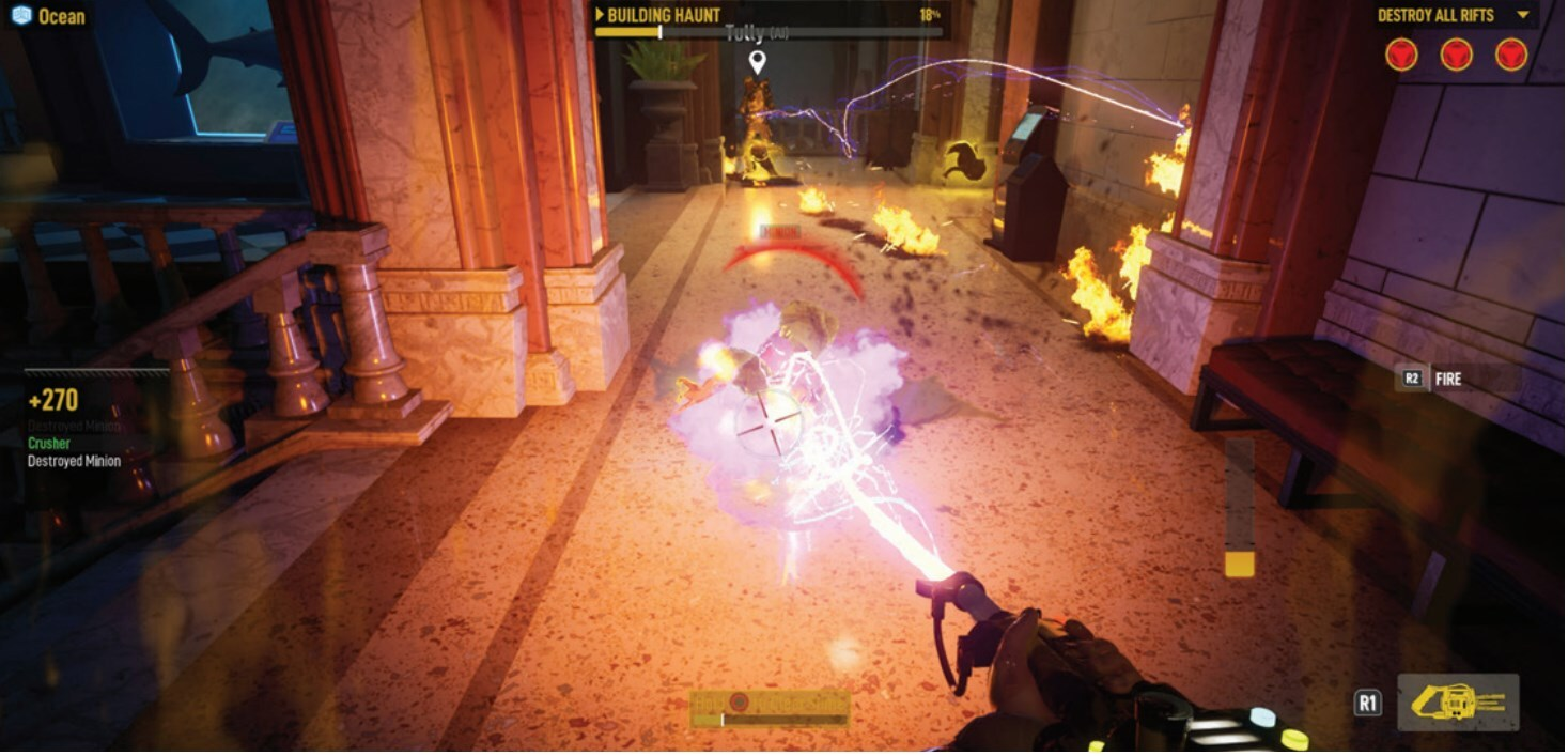
"We wanted to keep it simple as to what you can do as the ghost and Ghostbusters," says IllFonic CEO and co-founder Charles Brungardt. "We wanted to make it clear what it was for pick up and play, but there's a lot of depth along the way and a lot of challenge that comes from it."

Knowing the ghost could be anywhere at any time, I suddenly feel like someone is watching me, and I'm not wrong; it's studying our movements. The ghost could be hiding in any inanimate object, such as a chair or painting, which can suddenly come to life and bounce or fly around should we get too close. Since we have the PKE meters out, the ghost won't stay planted for long since we can pinpoint its precise location. Even if it does, one of us can charge the PKE meter to let out a supersonic burst that will immediately free the ghoul from its hiding spot.



8m
RIFT
(HIDDEN)
R2
L2
34
L1
20
R1
219

As with IllFonic's other asymmetric multiplayer games, players should expect some fun and outlandish powers when it's their turn to control the ghost



We don't have to wait long to make contact. A flashing light in the hall ahead suddenly turns purple as a flying blob jets by. This ghost is diminutive like Slimer yet has eyes all around its head. We give chase, and our headsets come to life. One of my teammates is hot on its trail and needs our assistance trapping it. When we get to his location, we find him covered in slime. Purple ectoplasm drips from the ceiling and coats the floor and walls. Within the mess, our teammate kneels, waiting for a revival. We get him up and split up again. On the second floor of a cellblock, I find the ghost in front of a swirling portal, appearing to bond with it. I inform my teammates of what I'm seeing, and they tell me to light him up. If he secures the dimensional rift, he can come back to life at that location if we catch him in a trap. The ghost basically gets an extra life.

I put away the PKE meter and pull out the particle thrower. It roars to life with the same sounds as the movie and then puts on a visual show when I pull the trigger to generate an electric photon stream that rockets toward the ghost with yellow and blue hues. My aim is a little off the mark, and I set a bed ablaze, which will hurt my cash haul after the match is over. The ghost tries to flee, but my beam catches it at the door, creating an instant lasso. I can feel the ghost battling to free itself. I cry out to my teammates for advice on what to do next. This isn't like other Ghostbuster games where you must wear it down to automatically catch it. I can snatch this one anytime, but that means setting the trap.

This is where teamwork comes into play. A couple of players can keep a ghost in check with beams, while another throws the trap beneath it. All of this is manual, meaning you'll have to aim the trap and hope your throw is accurate. When the ghost gets sucked in, you must close the trap. Each player only has one trap, and you have to pick it up after each throw, or you won't have it later in the match.

I try to keep the ghost in this location as my teammates rush through the prison to join me, but it's free in the blink of many eyes and deals a little revenge by shaking like a dog to slime me. In this match, after several other slimings, the ghost reaches 100 percent haunting, and we return to the firehouse defeated.

I'm impressed by the game of cat and mouse that unfolded. It was a bit slow at times, but the hunt had an intensity to it as we could see the haunting progress made by the ghost. The battles brought some excitement yet were brief and just a tiny part of the action. It'll be interesting to see what strategies come from this asymmetrical experience. The Ghostbusters not only need to hunt the spirit but must also close the dimensional portals, as losing just one to a ghost can spell defeat. You may even want to double up on a rift to cross the streams to close it faster.

GLOBAL HAUNT
MadMattes
Property Damage
$ -$375

Slime Time

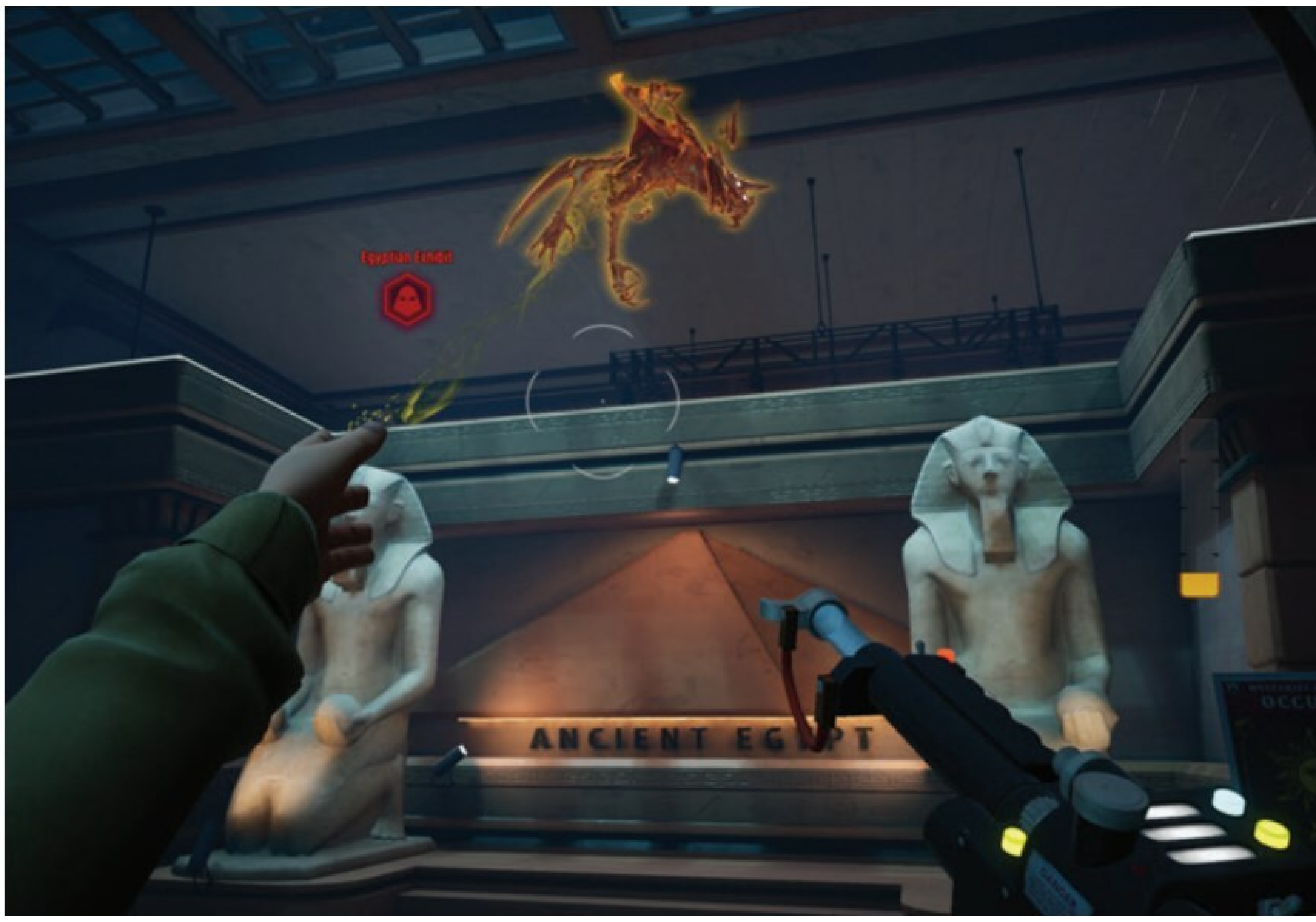
In our next match, I get to control the same purple ghost; only it's haunting the lodge this time. IllFonic says there are many different types of ghosts to play as, each with different sizes and abilities. You won't, however, see any undead being as tall as the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. Every ghost is humanoid-sized or smaller, and all are airborne.

The ghost is easy to control and is much faster than the Ghostbusters. The ability to freely move about the air gives me a considerable advantage, especially in open, multi-tiered areas where I can quickly ascend or descend to a different level. The Ghostbusters with grappling hooks can give chase, but I'm likely out of harm's way before they can make that move.

As I look for rifts, I see all objects I can possess highlight green when I fly by them. I hop into a trash bag outside of a room. After sitting still for a while, which recharges my PKE, I realize I can move the trash bag. It walks comically down the hall, almost appearing to have two feet at the bag's corners. I also learn that humans are everywhere in the lodge, and I must scare them to raise my haunting level.

The animated trash bag draws the attention of one lodge guest. When she's standing right next to the bag, I burst out of it, and she loses her mind and makes a mad dash down a staircase. I receive an alert that a human has fled, and I hear my ghost chuckle hideously. The global haunt meter ticks up to 25 percent, and I feel pretty good about my start.

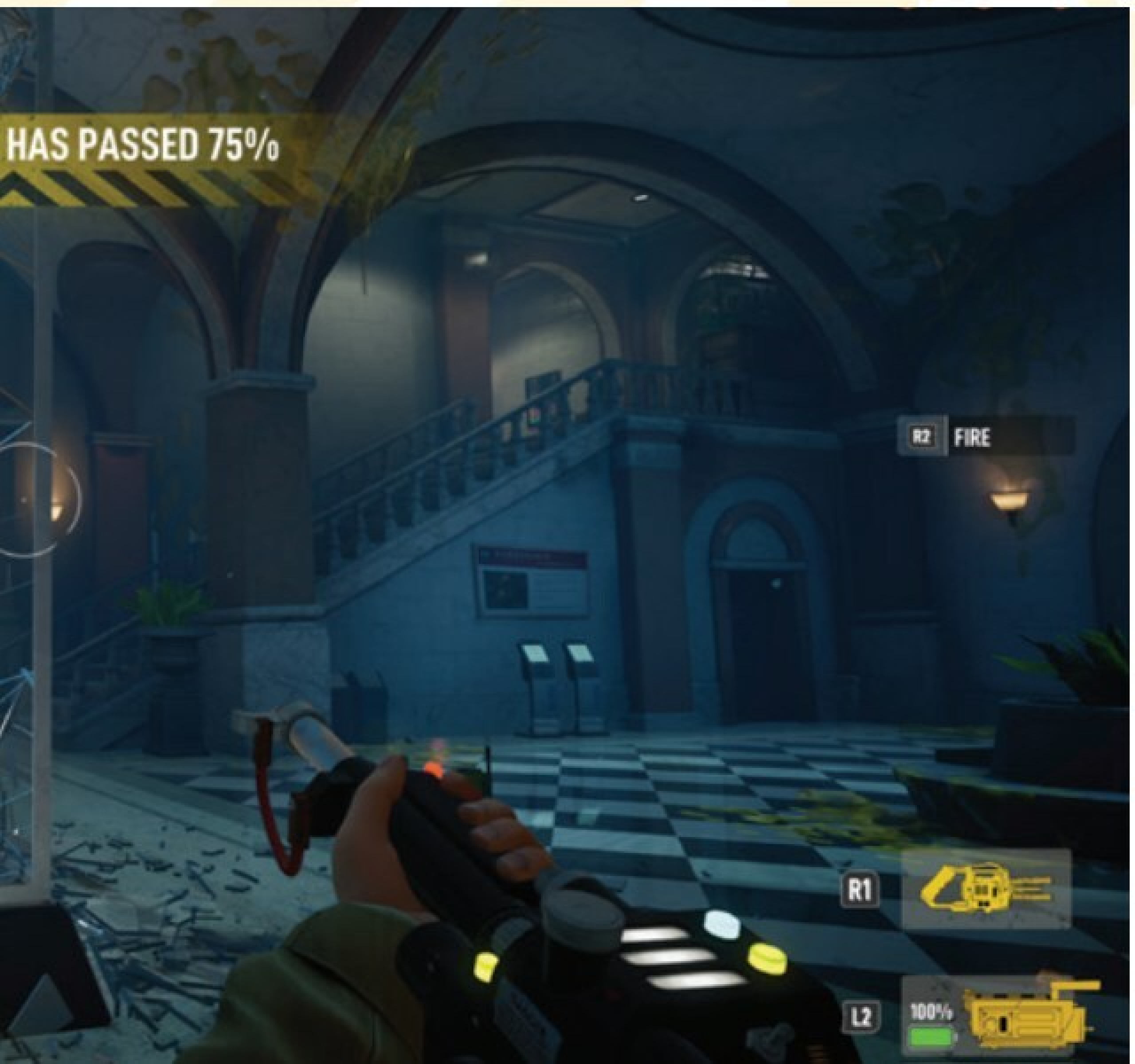
That is until the Ghostbusters find me hiding in a chair near a fireplace. I bolt out of the chair and try to reach a hallway, but not before a proton beam ensnares me. The game alerts me to jam on a button to free myself from the beam. The more I get attacked, the more rays that catch me make this effort harder. I free myself from the first beam and unleash hell upon the Ghostbusters. I slime the room, which downs one of my assailants, and summon my minion helpers to draw the other two's attention.

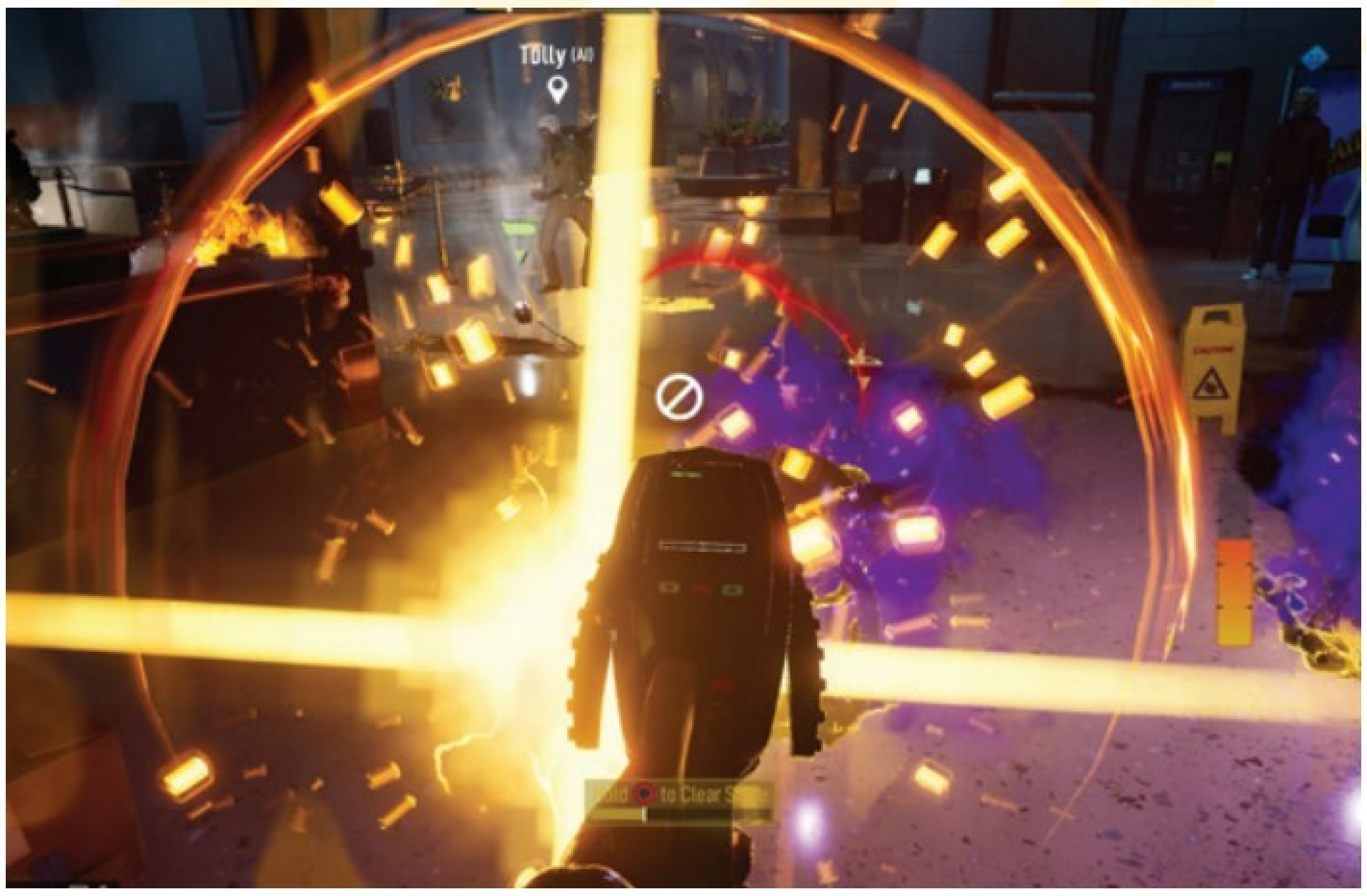


All my abilities are on cooldown meters, and I don't have many options other than to fly away and hide, hopefully haunting someone along the way. I make it a few rooms over before succumbing to a proton assault and the vacuum of the trap.

I've enjoyed all IllFonic's asymmetrical titles but have never stuck with them long. Ghostbusters: Spirits Unleashed is the easiest of the company's games to pick up and feel comfortable with, but I again question the depth of the experience. Will it have legs after a few matches? Where playing as Jason or the Predator was the best part of the other games, I found both the ghost and the Ghostbusters to be equally fun to play. Haunting people is the highlight but shooting that photon beam isn't far behind it.

With an October 18 release date, we don't have long to wait to see how the community takes to this game. ■





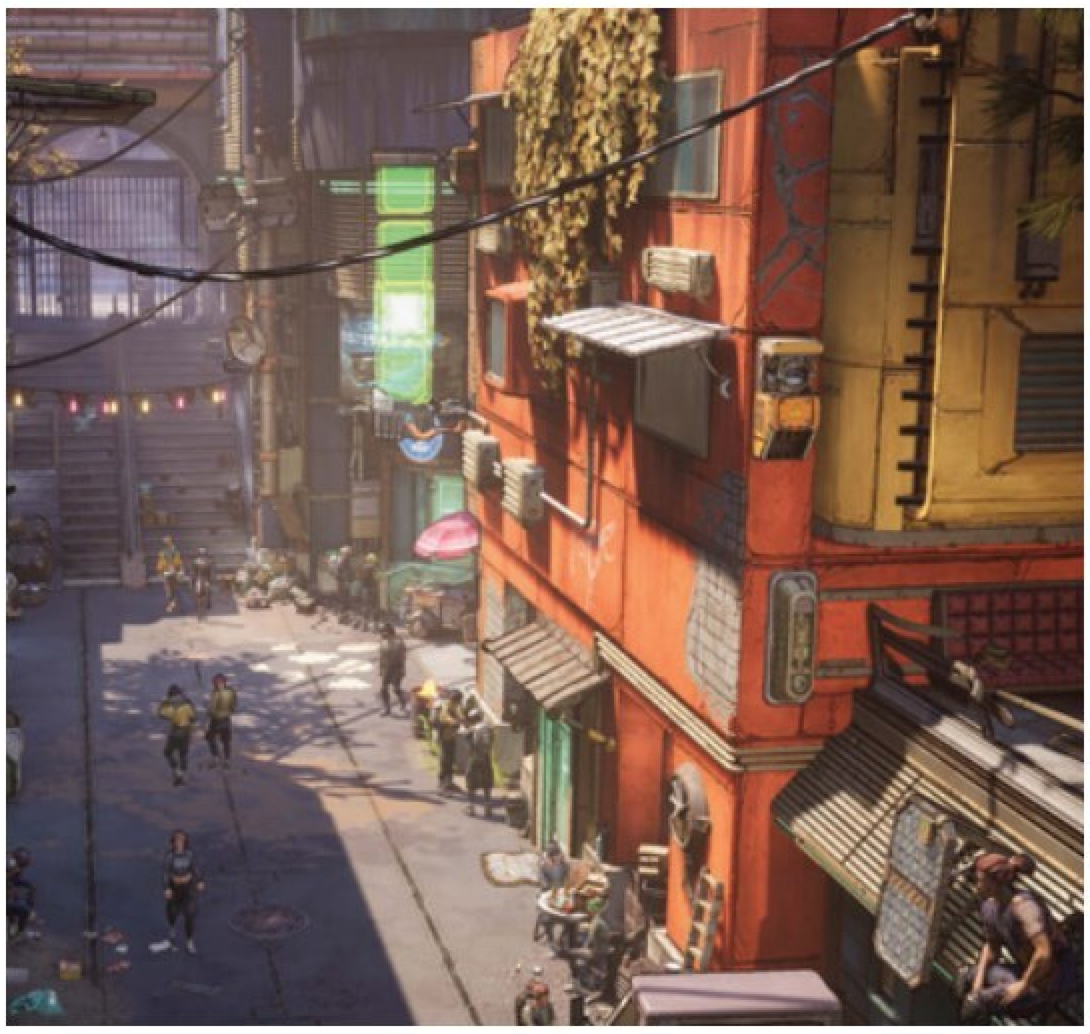
Previews

spotlight

68 DESTINY 2: LIGHTFALL // **70** THE LORDS OF THE FALLEN // **71** ATLAS FALLEN // **71** THE EXPANSE
72 INKBOUND // **73** HOGWARTS LEGACY // **73** SONIC FRONTIERS

NEW TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

Anu journey through Promethea



Publisher 2K teased in April that it was bringing back Telltale's Tales from the Borderlands series but that it would be developed in-house by Gearbox Software this time. Then, during Gamescom, Gearbox officially revealed the sequel, which isn't a direct continuation of Telltale's story but a spiritual successor called New Tales from the Borderlands, and that it will feature all five episodes on day one.

That trailer gave us a look at the new protagonists – altruistic scientist Anu, her streetwise brother Octavio, and local business owner Fran – as well as a peek at just how Tales from the Borderlands this new entry is at its core.

"Rather than trying to follow in those footsteps, we try to acknowledge the route those steps took but then try to do something different," Gearbox Software director of production James Lopez tells me. "Use the formula, use what worked, but do it Gearbox style."

That's why this game looks more visually similar to Borderlands 3 than the first Tales from the Borderlands.

Lopez says Gearbox is partnering with developers from the first game to ensure its spiritual successor remains authentic to the series' roots. That authenticity and dedication to making New Tales from the Borderlands feel right is evident in its recent first gameplay demo. In it, we see the unlikely trio of Anu, Octavio, and Fran attempting to escape danger in a sewer system riddled with Tediore troops.

The jokes are plenty, with some hitting harder than others, depending on your tolerance for Gearbox's trademark Borderlands humor. And the gameplay is nearly identical to that of Telltale's foray into this universe. Your primary mode of input comes from selecting dialogue choices and watching how they affect characters, the world, and the overarching narrative.

When it's time for a dialogue choice, you'll see options on the screen and a red bar beneath them to indicate how much time you have left to select one. Don't expect to see a "Fran will remember that" notification pop up after you make your decision, though, because unlike in Telltale's game, the team has done away with those on-screen markers. Instead, you'll have to decipher how that choice affects those around you based on what they do and say following it.

"There's an immediate impact," Gearbox Studios Quebec producer Frédéric Scheubel says. "What choice you make...will have its own sequence that will play differently. And some of those choices will have an impact mid-term and even longer term, affecting which ending you'll see, so pay attention, see how the characters will react. If you diss them, they'll react to it. We feel that every choice is important, so we moved away from the hints that we had prior in Tales from the Borderlands."

He continued, "Instead of doing it like 'this choice is the important choice,' all choices may be important and may have led you to these circumstances later on." In classic Telltale fashion, at the end of each episode, there will be a recap of what you did. There will also be an NPC assassin bot that follows the trio around, acting as a Greek Chorus character for the party.

Lopez says the dialogue choices shown in the PAX West demo are just some of the hundreds in the final game, and all of them will help determine which of the five endings you get before the credits roll. Lopez says Anu, Octavio, and Fran have clear archetypes, but players are not required to follow those. It's your story, after all, and when you veer off the archetypal path of each character, Lopez says you'll see characters react to that.

One exciting aspect of New Tales from the Borderlands shown during its first gameplay demo was Vaultlanders, one of its minigames. It begins with you selecting a Borderlands-inspired minifigure, which doubles as a type of collectible found and earned throughout the story, from a very fighting game-esque character selection screen. The game then thrusts you into a comical, action-figure fight that plays out with button clicks and quick-time events. In this instance, winning the battle earned Octavio the Zane Flynt minifigure, which fans might recognize as one of the playable characters from Borderlands 3, a game that takes place one year before the events of this one.

The rest of the demo plays out as you'd expect – jokes, quick-time events, tough dialogue choices, and plenty of peril – and it's worth watching if you're excited about what's in store in New Tales from the Borderlands ahead of its October 21 release. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER 2K Games **DEVELOPER** Gearbox Software **RELEASE** October 21

A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM

Rat it again

A video game sequel is hard to create, especially if the previous game was a commercial success. Why did the game resonate with fans? How many new features does the sequel need to justify another price tag? Should anything be changed at all? How do you make something fresh while retaining the identity established in the first game?

These are the questions developers constantly ask themselves while making a sequel. The road to publishing a project is full of pitfalls, and it's easy to lose the path.

Asobo Studios, the creator of the Plague Tale series and Microsoft Flight Simulator, seems to be navigating these challenges effectively, smartly building atop the foundation laid by A Plague Tale: Innocence and sticking to what we truly want: another riveting story. Sure, there are updates to gameplay (most notably combat features), but I loved the first game because of the protagonist Amicia and her journey protecting her younger brother Hugo. And that's precisely where A Plague Tale: Requiem begins.

Following the events of Innocence, the siblings once again find themselves on the run, but this time, they're searching for refuge on a mysterious island off France's coast. My demo begins early in the game, during a chapter called "A Burden of Blood." The rat plague is gone, but Hugo's affliction, which I won't detail due to spoilers, causes him to experience seizures. Amicia and Lucas, a young character from the first game adept at alchemy, must harvest Nightshade to stop the convulsions.

There's an herbalist outside the town's walls, and the pair must quickly cut through the Butcher's District to meet him. Upon arrival, the district's populace is under attack from an unlikely source. Rather than protecting the city, Amicia and Lucas surprisingly discover soldiers – the very ones meant to protect the town – killing

the townsfolks in the streets. No one is allowed in or out of the gates. But Hugo needs medicine quickly.

As you might expect from the sequel to A Plague Tale, swarms of rats eventually enter the scene, creating a breeding ground for clever logic puzzles and tense stealth moments. The game's basic rules are still the same: Use fire to repel rats and extinguish the fire to attract them. Requiem features rewarding puzzles requiring you to avoid rats via torchlight, free carcasses from meat hooks for diversions, and sabotage enemy guards. The latter leads explicitly to some of the most gruesome visuals in any game; it's heart-wrenching to see a human devoured by rodents before your eyes. No matter any given puzzle's difficulty, it always feels tense, like I'm skirting through by the skin of my teeth.

Everything serves the larger narrative. When I fail a challenge, I feel like I'm letting down the characters on screen. I wince whenever the protagonists must kill an enemy; they're kids, after all. I'm heavily invested in Amicia and Hugo's lives and want them to find happiness. But I'm not naïve. I know whatever lies ahead for these characters is indeed grim.

BY ALEX VAN AKEN

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Focus Entertainment
DEVELOPER Asobo Studio **RELEASE** October 18

CREATE YOUR OWN
RUBY-BELLIED
JACKAHO

MAJORS OFFERED

BUSINESS & INNOVATION
BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY
TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION (MS)
TECHNOLOGY LEADERSHIP (MS)
TECHNOLOGY STUDIES

CREATION & SIMULATION
DIGITAL MAKER AND FABRICATION
HUMAN COMPUTER INTERACTION
ROBOTICS AND EMBEDDED SYSTEMS
VIRTUAL REALITY

CYBER SECURITY
CYBER SECURITY (MS)
NETWORK ENGINEERING
NETWORK SECURITY
TECHNOLOGY FORENSICS

DIGITAL ARTS
ADVERTISING ART
DIGITAL MARKETING
DIGITAL VIDEO

GAME STUDIES
GAME ART AND ANIMATION
GAME DESIGN
GAME PRODUCTION AND MANAGEMENT (MS)
GAME PROGRAMMING

SOFTWARE ENGINEERING
ADVANCING COMPUTER SCIENCE
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
DATA SCIENCE
SOFTWARE ENGINEERING (MS)

University of Advancing Technology
UAT
Learn. Experience. Innovate.

uat.edu/gamestudies

DEAD ISLAND 2

Trouble in paradise

Despite releasing to lukewarm critical reception, the first Dead Island fulfilled the open-world, zombie-congested, co-op obsessions of action/RPG fans everywhere. Inspired by cult-classic movies like *28 Days Later* and games like Left 4 Dead, the undead adventure boasted skill trees, close-quarters combat, and an expansive backdrop with claustrophobic hotel hallways, sparkling beaches, and lush jungles. Sadly, the highly anticipated sequel got stuck in development hell. An E3 2014 announcement trailer excited audiences with its comedically gory premise of an airhead jogger marathoning down the boardwalk as the world is literally consumed behind him. But then the sequel disappeared into obscurity.

Initially, Spec Ops: The Line developer Yager Development was slated to helm the project until Deep Silver handed the reins to Crackdown 3 studio Sumo Digital two years later. But in 2019, the team behind Homefront: The Revolution, Dambuster Studios, took over. Job postings and gameplay leaks became a lifeline of sorts. Smattering signs of life told fans Dead Island 2 was still underway, but skepticism continued to grow. A Day One Edition leak on Amazon all but confirmed that more info about the sequel was imminent, and then Gamescom's Opening Night Live gave everyone the deep dive they'd been hoping for.

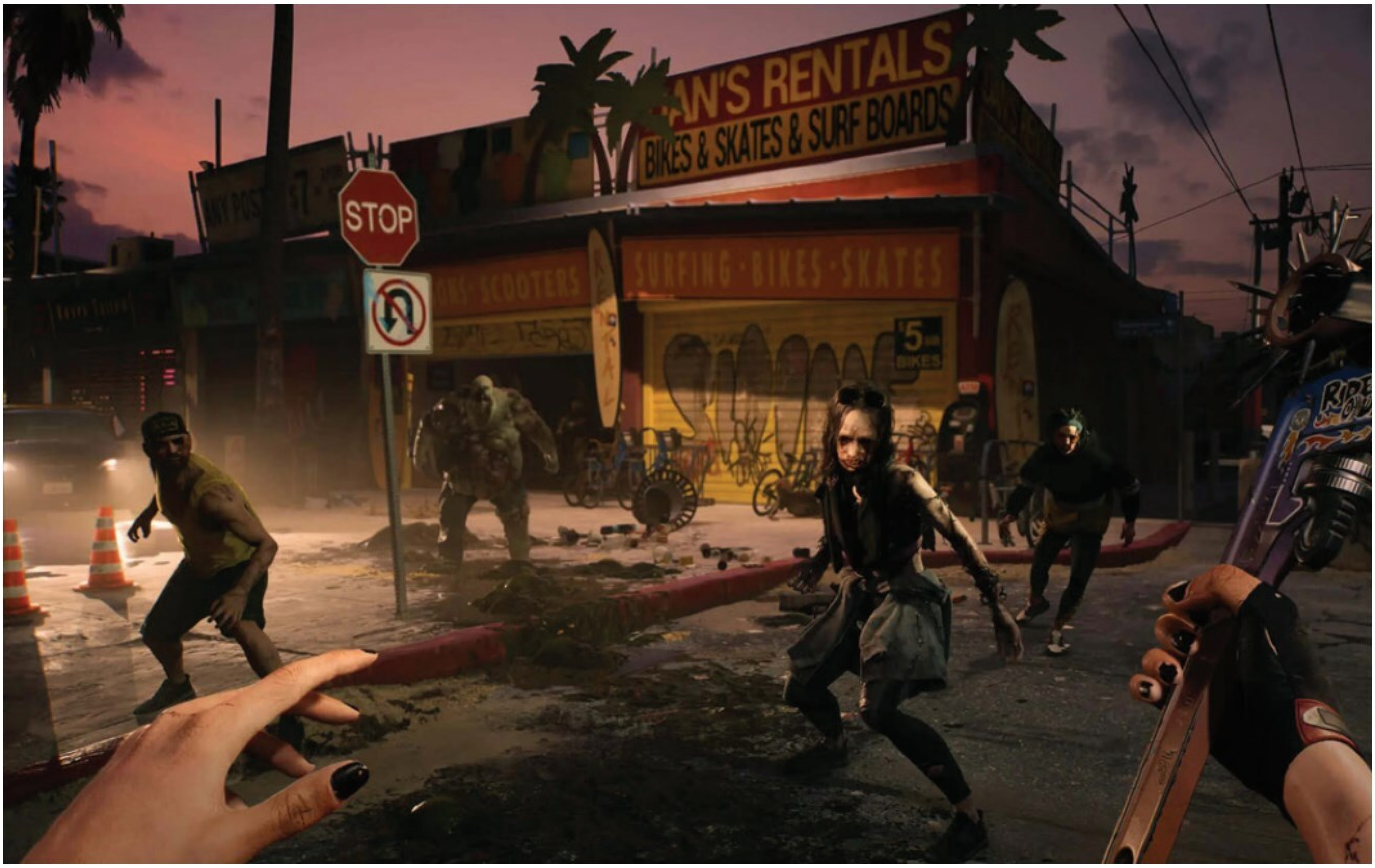
VENICE KITCHEN
SUNGLASSES
POLICE

Jacob, a playable Lenny Kravitz look-alike, immediately stole the spotlight by sauntering down the rotten streets of L.A. with nothing but an emptied wooden rifle. From the high-end condos of Beverly Hills to the forsaken carnivals along Venice Beach, Jacob slaughtered dozens of zombies, swinging his firearm into faces and through the torsos of his decaying adversaries. A gameplay trailer revealed various vistas to navigate and armies of undead to bring to their knees. New and old faces (Sam B is back!) graced several cutscenes and environmental hazards like noxious pools and gasoline leaks showcased the dangers that await players in Dambuster Studios' Californian wasteland.

Dead Island 2's narrative follows six playable characters (or Slayers) living amid a fatal virus. They've been bitten/infected but emerge immune and are undeniably stronger for it. By harnessing the "zombie powers running through their veins," the six protagonists swing, kick, and shoot their way to salvation. Sounds intense, right? Well, in a recent interview, creative director James Worrall said the team opted for a pulpier, light-hearted tone to the age-old walking dead formula.

"We wanted to shy away from the grim and the gritty," Worrall said. "Our heroes aren't survivors, they're thrivers. They run towards the horde, and they absolutely take thrill in the slaughter."

The narrative might elicit laughs from players, but Dead Island 2's combat is as visceral as it gets. According to game director David Stenton, Dambuster Studios' gore-tech, internally codenamed F.L.E.S.H. (or Fully

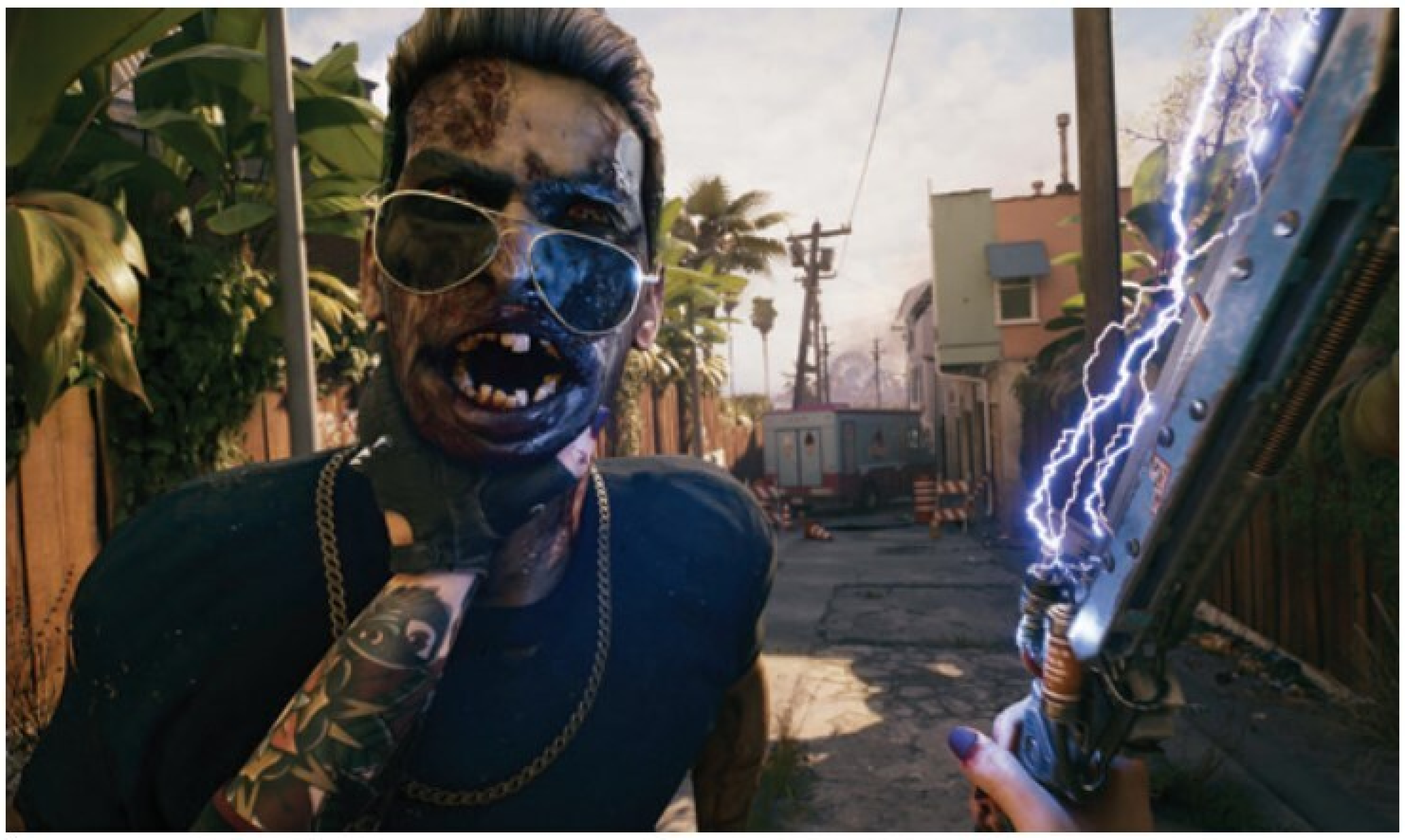


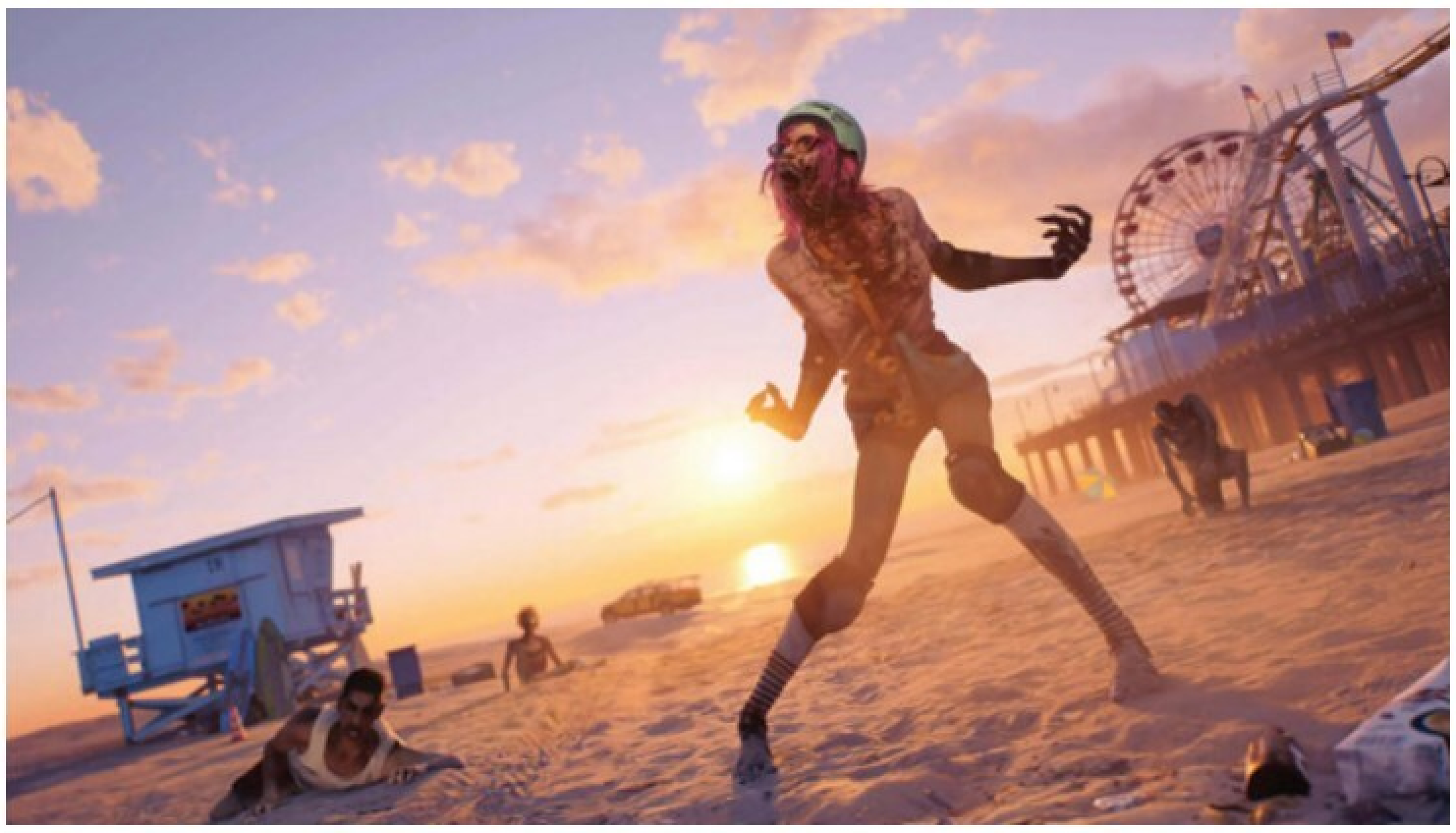
Locational Evisceration System for Humanoids), allows players to "slice, dice, chop, dismember, melt, bludgeon, and break" the undead in innumerable ways. The bloodshed is procedurally generated. Moreover, skill cards serve as the primary progression system. Discovered or rewarded, these cards, denoted by different tiers based on kinetic abilities, story progression, and more, help players define and enhance their preferred playstyle. Card decks are customizable and Slayer re-specs have no limits, emphasizing loadout experimentation across any given playthrough.

Like the first game, Dead Island 2 offers an array of personalities with questlines and intimidating zombie types, including the mysterious apex variants, that add flavor to each encounter, and zany co-op for up to three players. The sequel isn't open world, but each district is expansive and chockful of activities like hub locations for NPC interactions, workbenches that strengthen weapons, and area-specific predators. At Gamescom, lead narrative designer Khan said, "We got to build the game from the ground up. It's a combat toybox of melee brutality... with a few guns for fun."

You can drop into Dead Island 2's hellish L.A. on PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Stadia, and PC when the zombie infestation devours the world this coming February. **BY JASON GUISAO**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (3-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Deep Silver
DEVELOPER Dambuster Studios **RELEASE** February 3





DESTINY 2: LIGHTFALL

The beginning of the end

No one can fault Bungie for resting on its laurels. The studio continues to push in new directions with fresh gameplay mechanics and locations with the ongoing Destiny 2 experience, even as recent installments suggest that the current storyline is steering toward a conclusion. We've known for some time that Lightfall would be the next major expansion, but recent reveals pull the curtain back to help Guardians plan their next big adventure.

The former Cabal emperor, Calus, has lurked in the background of the fiction for years. Lightfall appears to be pushing the character back into the limelight as the rotund alien returns from his communion with The Witness alongside a Shadow Legion of troops infused with Darkness. In addition to the newly empowered Cabal, Calus' forces also include the new Tormentor enemy, a towering scythe-wielding, boss-like foe who can show up in the middle of an otherwise normal battle, transforming the fight into a real struggle.

The Shadow Legion is descending onto the planet Neptune, a heretofore unexplored destination for the Last City's Guardians. Far from just a distant and desolate world at the solar system's edge, we learn that an entire offshoot of humanity has been dwelling on the planet since the Collapse, protected by its own Guardian-like warriors, called Cloudstriders. The central metropolis on Neptune is a sprawling, neon-lit city called Neomuna, an explorable urban locale that recalls more than a few '80s-themed sci-fi experiences.

After the introduction of Stasis subclasses in Beyond Light, more recent content drops have been updating the original Light-based subclasses to the modern era, adding to the build-crafting potential of the game. With Lightfall, Guardians get another new suite of Darkness-based powers called Strand. The green-hued Strand powers certainly have a striking visual flair, rooted in psionic abilities that interconnect all time and space.

While each class will have its own new powers, everyone gains access to a new grappling hook capability. As a traversal tool, similar mechanics have proven transformative in games like Halo Infinite, adding a greater level of speed and potential for strategic battlefield positioning – here's hoping the same will be true for Strand.

Many details about individual Strand powers remain unrevealed, but we've seen intriguing glimpses. Hunters have a new rope dart super. Warlocks become telekinetic masters that fling out missiles that unravel into swirling threads of destruction wherever they strike. And titans spawn long claws that they can use to shred their opponents. New power suites like these tend to reshape the nature of play dramatically; it will be exciting to see how Strand redefines the daily play loop.

Lightfall won't be out until February, so there's plenty of other Destiny goodness to enjoy in the meantime, including the current pirate-themed Season of Plunder content. But for players who've been following the fiction for many years, it's exciting to see the science-fiction/fantasy saga start to wrap up some long-hanging threads, and more fully open up the major planets of our solar system for discovery. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE Online Multiplayer Shooter **PUBLISHER** Bungie
DEVELOPER Bungie **RELEASE** February 28

THE LORDS OF THE FALLEN

Building a monster of a sequel

Publisher CI Games has long wanted to make a sequel to 2014's Lords of the Fallen, which sold over 3 million copies. Hoping to build on this success, developer Deck13 Interactive began work on the next entry in the series, but development didn't go as planned, and the studio shifted its focus to The Surge, another Soulslike. Years went by before CI Games revealed Deck13 was no longer on the project, and it was now in the hands of the newly formed Defiant Studios. That vision also ran into development difficulties and was shelved.

After another couple of years, CI Games appears to have found the studio to bring the sequel to marketmarket: Hexworks, a new development collective based out of Barcelona and Bucharest, but with developers scattered from the U.S. to Romania. The oddly named sequel, The Lords of the Fallen, is its first project, which sounds ambitious.

Set 1,000 years after the original game, The Lords of the Fallen can be either a single-player adventure or a cooperative one, allowing two players to experience uninterrupted online play. A press release describes this sequel as an "expansive RPG filled with NPC quests, compelling characters, and rich narrative." The world is also said to be five times larger and interconnected. As you would expect, the focus is again on Soulslike combat that will not be as mechanical, allowing for faster melee backed by "devastating magic."

The story tells of the demon god Adyr's resurrection. While it would seem the player's goal is to stop Adyr from coming back, Hexworks teases two paths with the line, "Will your legend be one of light, or one of darkness?" The player characters are a part of the fabled Dark Crusaders, warriors capable of journeying between two worlds, which are a considerable part of the experience.

A teaser trailer and a handful of images give us an idea of what we can expect from the game visually, but we have yet to see The Lords of Fallen in action. CI Games hopes to release this project in 2023 for PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC. **BY ANDREW REINER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** CI Games
DEVELOPER Hexworks **RELEASE** 2023

ATLAS FALLEN

The power of ... sand?

Atlas Fallen is Deck13 Interactive's next game, announced the same day as The Lords of the Fallen, the studio's other current big project. In addition to appreciating "Fallen," Deck13's new title shares Lords' focus on teamwork, allowing players to step into a fully cooperative or solo story campaign.

The similarities end there, however, from what we know of the game thus far. Atlas Fallen separates itself from all other games through the wild idea of empowering the player with sand. The substance some space-faring folk hate because it's coarse, rough, irritating, and gets everywhere, fuels Atlas Fallen's weapons and magics. In a teaser video, a masked and heavily armored protagonist uses sand to transform a sword into a whip, golden grains spinning magically to take on a new shape. He then uses a connection to sand to increase mobility, his feet gliding inches above dunes at a great speed, almost like he's on a hoverboard. Sand even flows through enemy veins.

In a few gameplay clips, we see the sprawling size of Atlas Fallen's world, which encourages exploration and epic-sized battles against legendary creatures. The game's goal is to liberate this area from the oppression of angry gods. We don't know exactly when we'll get that chance, but publisher Focus Entertainment has the game slated for a 2023 release.

BY ANDREW REINER

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Focus Entertainment
DEVELOPER Deck13 Interactive **RELEASE** 2023

THE EXPANSE: A TELLTALE SERIES

Zero-G drama

The Expanse franchise is an increasingly big part of any conversation about must-know sci-fi properties. The excellent novels gave way to a stellar TV adaptation, giving us a chance for an interactive drama in the same universe. The nuanced characters and cultures of The Expanse are a good fit for the kind of work that Telltale and Deck Nine are both known for, so it's exciting to see how the project might come together.

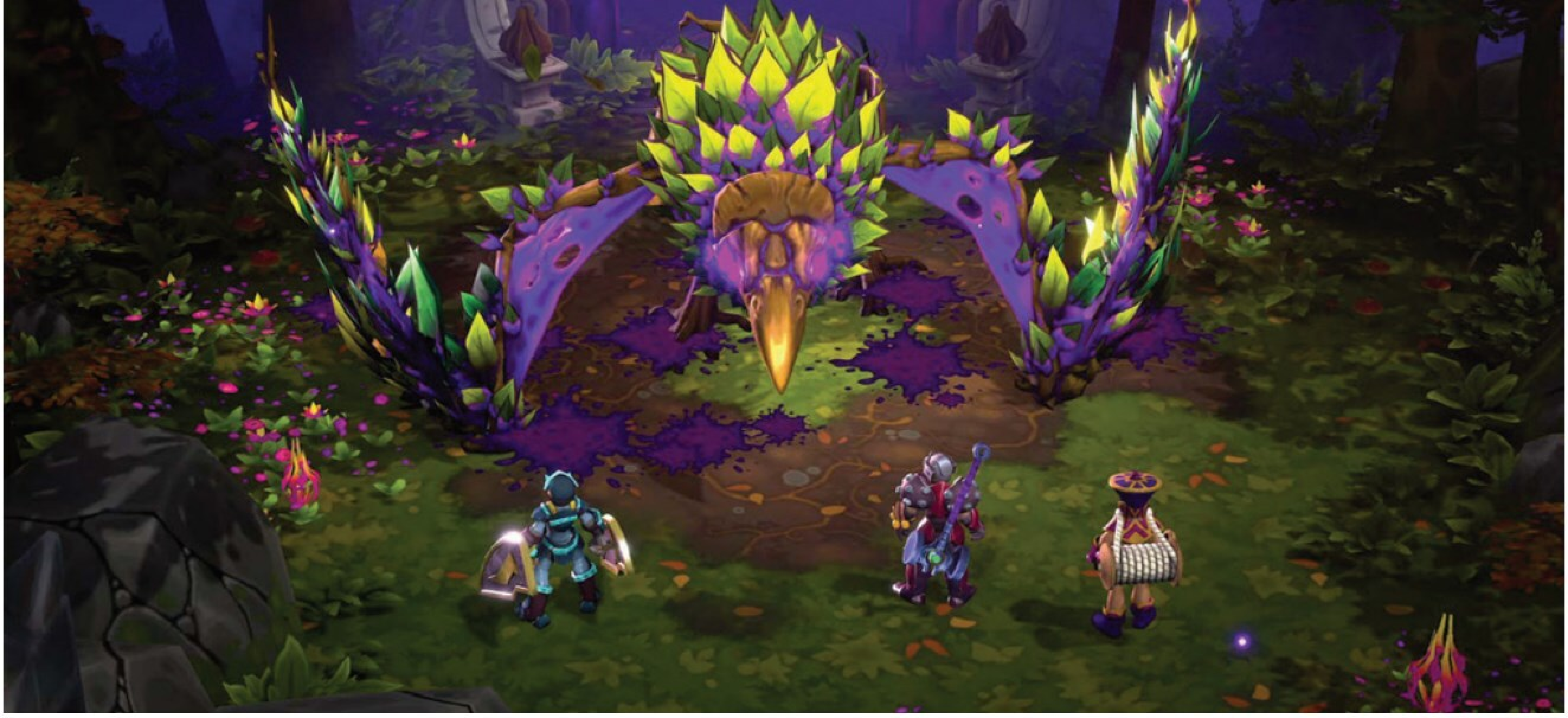
The new Expanse game offers a glimpse at the earlier life of one of the show's most intriguing leads – Camina Drummer. In the story, we find her serving as XO aboard a spaceship called Artemis while it undergoes a mutiny. In keeping with other games from both involved development teams, a big focus is on branching narrative trees where you shape the outcome for Drummer and her crew.

Beyond those expectations, The Expanse game is throwing in some interesting twists, including action sequences like the dodging of debris, and a core navigational mechanic around zero-gravity exploration. Some of the early footage reveals a dark playspace of twisting corridors, a ruined ship being scavenged, and some gruesome encounters with beheaded dead bodies – suggesting that the Drummer may have a lot more than a mutiny to confront over the course of the story.

Cara Gee, who played Camina on the show, is returning to voice the character, and she's suggested that this earlier version exhibits more vulnerabilities than her later incarnation. "By the time we meet her in the series, they've been cauterized," Gee says.

The Expanse is targeting a release next summer, so there's plenty of time to catch up on the show and books if you've missed out. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Telltale Games **DEVELOPER** Deck Nine, Telltale Games
RELEASE Summer 2023



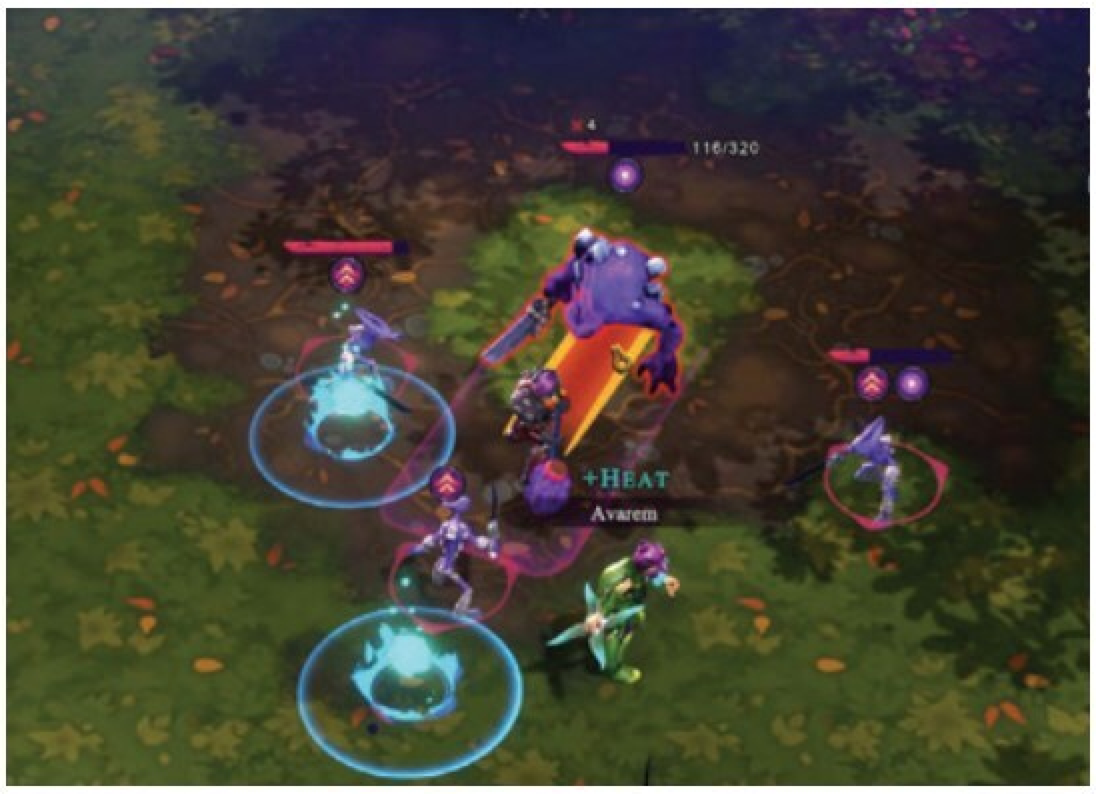
INKBOUND

Tactics meets roguelike

Shiny Shoe, the team behind Monster Train, has been hard at work has been hard at work on its newest twist on the roguelike formula. The studio's earlier project found players navigating a train on its way through Hell, using deckbuilding card mechanics to fight one challenging battle after the next. In Inkbound, the team has held onto the roguelike formula, but almost everything else is going in a new direction.

Players each control a character making their way through a magical world called Atheneum, a place from which countless stories emerge and come to life. Players enter realms defined by books and help to shape and define the worlds and narratives within. Drawing inspiration from isometric RPGs and MOBAs, each player moves through the fictional lands and paints the ground with area-of-effect powers that aim to bring down the creatures encountered along the way.

Inkbound can be played solo or with up to four players simultaneously. In the ensuing turn-based tactical battles, Shiny Shoe is experimenting with an intriguing approach that allows multiple players to act simultaneously.



The focus is on character growth through new powers and bonuses over the course of a given run, but you can also collect glyphs that carry over between your runs; glyphs can be spent in a session to open up new missions, paths, or other beneficial situations, but there's also more to spend in runs than glyphs you can earn, so it's critical to save those glyphs for an attempt where they'll make a difference.

Each player can specialize their efforts around a preferred playstyle or experience with an initial class selection, and the classes I learned about were surprising and unusual. The Magma Miner is a heavy melee-oriented brawler who sets enemies on fire. The Mosscloak is a fast-moving fighter specializing in critical hits or fast strikes. The Obelisk carries double shields and, unsurprisingly, helps to tank for the party; the more damage they take, the more this class can dish out. And the Weaver creates threads to enemies that damage and debuff, with a clear drive toward setting up elaborate combos.

Aesthetically, Inkbound's isometric presentation is bright and inviting, with vibrant color and light usage, mildly cartoony visuals, and a frenetic pace to exploration and combat that keeps the action light and breezy. At certain moments, it reminded me of visual palettes I've seen in games like Torchlight and World of Warcraft. In the battles I witnessed during an early demo, characters emerged into rounded arena spaces in which battles would unfold. Success often came down to a mix of good upgrade selection ahead of the fight and smart positioning while confronting the many monsters that show up.

Whether with card decks or isometric turn-based arena fights, strategy roguelikes live or die by tense decision points, challenging but balanced combat, and clever upgrades that let you overcome seemingly impossible odds. Shiny Shoe has already proven its ability to iterate and build a game of supreme depth and challenge with its last project. Inkbound is still early in development, but my glimpse suggests the team is applying the lessons it learned and shaping a new project that might be just as fascinating as its last, albeit with a completely different look and vibe.

BY MATT MILLER

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Shiny Shoe **DEVELOPER** Shiny Shoe **RELEASE** 2023

HOGWARTS LEGACY

Spiders, threstrals, and curses, oh my!

Hogwarts Legacy returned to the spotlight with a new trailer at Gamescom's Opening Night Live event. This time, developer Avalanche gave us a cinematic look at one of the game's questlines. Dubbed "Sebastian Sallow's Dark Legacy," the quest seemingly gives players a chance to embrace the Dark Arts and learn Crucio, an unforgivable curse in the world of *Harry Potter*. Essentially a curse that allows users to torture their targets, only the worst of the worst in the Harry Potter series have been caught using it, so embracing it in Hogwarts Legacy will surely affect your standing with friends and foes alike.

Of course, you can ignore Sebastian Sallow and deny his advances to teach you the Cruciatus curse, but that will be up to you – it's an RPG, after all, and your wizard is yours. It's not surprising that unforgivable curses are in Hogwarts Legacy, but it's a choice to potentially grant Dark Arts practices such as that to students early in their magic careers. And personally, it's likely not magic I'll use, especially when I have other spells and creatures from the wizarding world at my disposal.

And speaking of creatures, this latest trailer also gave us a look at some extra-large spiders likely calling the Forbidden Forest home and a quick glimpse at a Thestral, a flying horse-like animal only seen by those who have witnessed death. Something tells me a lot of us will be escaping the former by riding atop the latter.

This new look at Hogwarts Legacy, set in the wizarding world created by controversial author J.K. Rowling who will undoubtedly profit from the sales of this game, comes hot on the tail of a recent delay. Initially due out sometime this year, Hogwarts Legacy will now hit consoles and PC on February 10.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Interactive **DEVELOPER** Avalanche
RELEASE February 10 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC), TBA (Switch)

SONIC FRONTIERS

Speeding towards launch

Sonic Frontiers was one of the final triple-A holiday games without a release date, but that changed at Gamescom. Sega and Sonic Team finally announced that we'll be able to sprint through the open zones of Frontiers on November 8. Not just that, but we got additional trailers giving us more insight into the adventure that awaits.

Alongside the release date announcement, we received a peek at Ares Island, the second Starfall Island Sonic explores. Juxtaposed against the lush, green environments of Kronos, the first open-zone area, Ares appears to be a dry, rocky desert. This second island looks to have its own world bosses and enemies, meaning this is more than just a different backdrop.

A second trailer comprised of new footage confirmed what we have suspected since we first learned that Chaos Emeralds play a major role in the story of Sonic Frontiers. That new trailer, set to "Vandalize," the game's ending vocal theme from rock band One Ok Rock, shows Sonic exploring Kronos Island before getting completely overpowered by a massive Titan.

Titans are seemingly some of the biggest challenges Sonic faces on the islands. When I played an early build of the game back in May, Sonic mentioned that he'd need the Chaos Emeralds to face off against something that powerful. We see that scenario play out in this trailer, as Sonic scales the massive Titan, retrieves the final Chaos Emerald and transforms into Super Sonic. The trailer cuts away as Super Sonic hurtles toward the Titan, but we can guess a boss battle follows.

Sonic Frontiers has looked promising nearly every step of the way. My hands-on impressions were positive, even though I played a very early build. Each time I've gotten a new look, I've become more excited for the fresh take on the franchise. Now that we have an actual date to circle on the calendar, that excitement has reached new levels. **BY BRIAN SHEA** ■

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Sega
DEVELOPER Sonic Team **RELEASE** November 8

Reviews

spotlight

76 TEMTEM // **77** METAL: HELLSINGER // **80** ROLLERDROME
81 BLOSSOM TALES II: THE MINOTAUR PRINCE // **81** SAINTS ROW

For more information on our scoring system, visit GameInformer.com/Scoring
To read all of our reviews, visit GameInformer.com/Reviews

GI MUST PLAY

SPLATOON 3

Multicolored mayhem

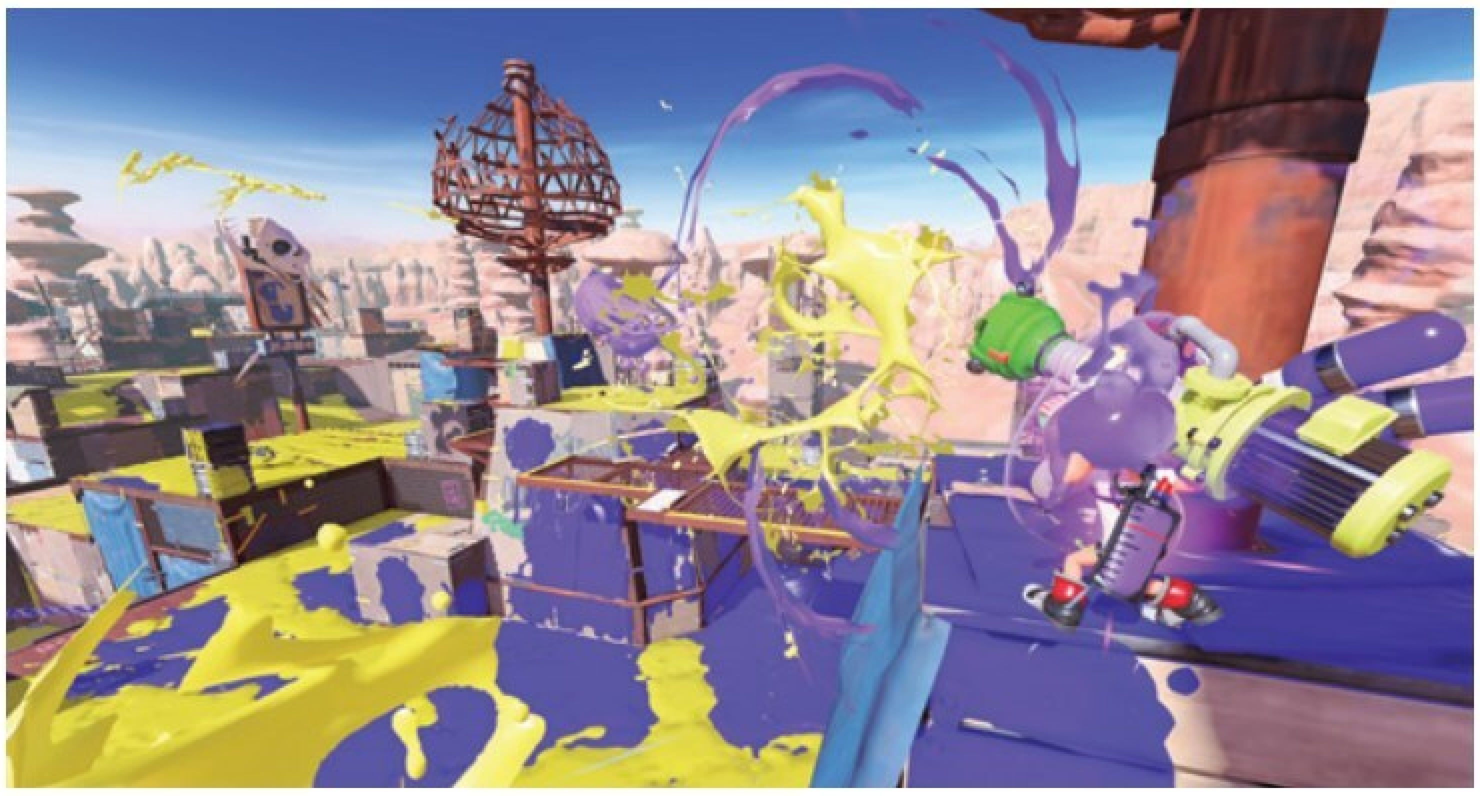
Since its debut in 2015, the Splatoon series has delivered unique, colorful gameplay cribbed by scarce launch content and disappointing time restrictions for specific modes. While post-launch content greatly bolstered both games to this point, I've always been disappointed by how little was initially on offer. Now on its third entry, the series may feel a bit less fresh, but Splatoon 3 remedies the series' long-standing launch content woes while retaining all the fun that made the series such a success.

Stepping back into the stylish shoes of your custom inkling feels great; splattering your brightly colored ink looks, feels, and sounds satisfyingly messy, particularly when you're splatting an enemy. Few games match the smooth, intuitive mobility Splatoon gives you while submerged and cruising through a map. While Splatoon 3 provides more modes than ever, those core gameplay tenets carry over regardless of which one you play.

Splatoon's competitive multiplayer, where two opposing teams battle to cover the map (and each other) with their color ink, is the destination for most, and that is where the added content feels most impactful. While maps unfortunately still operate on a timed rotation, the pool from which they are pulled is much deeper than previous launches; the 12 Turf War maps, consisting of both old and new stages, nearly match the launch total of the first two games combined.

Splatoon 3 also carries forward the weapons from past games while introducing fun arsenal additions like a useful multi-target bow with rounds that explode when fully charged and the Splatana, which makes you feel like an ink-slinging ninja. Meanwhile, Splatoon 3 gives high-skill players new tools in the form of Squid Surge, a new wall-climbing burst, and Squid Roll, a shielded jump that lets you turn on a dime while swimming. Squid Surge is less valuable unless you're climbing a tall wall, but Squid Roll, with its ability to chain together multiple moves in rapid succession, can alter the outcome of nearly any encounter if used effectively.

Much like previous games, the frantic pace of these three-minute matches makes them ideal for bite-sized gaming sessions while also appealing to those who fall into a "just one more match" mindset. The final minute, where the music ramps up and everyone tries to cover as much ground as possible, remains an adrenaline rush in the race to splash more ink than the opposing team. That rush amplifies in the revamped Splatfests, which now include three distinct teams. Most of the experience remains unchanged, but the new Tricolor Turf Wars, where the four-player first-place team must defend the center position against two squads of two, shake things up. These intense matches require new strategies for everyone involved since the groups converge from opposite sides of the map.



While the series is rightfully known for its competitive multiplayer, the other two main modes are also worthwhile components. Splatoon 3's Salmon Run evolves the exciting wave-based cooperative PvE multiplayer experience by adding more bosses (all of whom require unique strategies to defeat) and the ability to throw the eggs you retrieve from them into the goal basket. Working together to defeat minions and retrieve enough eggs from fallen bosses to progress to the next round never ceases to excite. However, the biggest boon to this mode is that the arbitrary time restrictions from Splatoon 2 are gone in favor of the mode receiving the same 24/7 availability of the other pillars.

This iteration also continues the series' tradition of providing enjoyable single-player missions that take advantage of the various mechanics of the franchise. Splatoon 3's single-player Hero mode is a great way to familiarize yourself with the game's controls, strategies, and weapons, but it's far more than a glamorized tutorial. The story is inconsequential, but thanks to various gimmicks introduced at a rapid clip and puzzles involving your new companion, Smallfry, Hero mode's levels present largely satisfying explorations of how the developers can stretch the core gameplay in surprising and exciting ways.

I loved missions like one where I grinded on rails while participating in a fast-paced shooting gallery or another where I navigated through an enemy-filled maze with a big twist at the end. While I loved almost all the time I spent in Hero Mode, there are a few misses, with some missions serving up more frustration than fun, and others veering too close to missions I played in Splatoon 2. The boss battles, which were among my favorite parts of past games, serve up a mixed bag, though they're mostly disappointing. The ones that do hit, though, are among the best the series has ever presented.

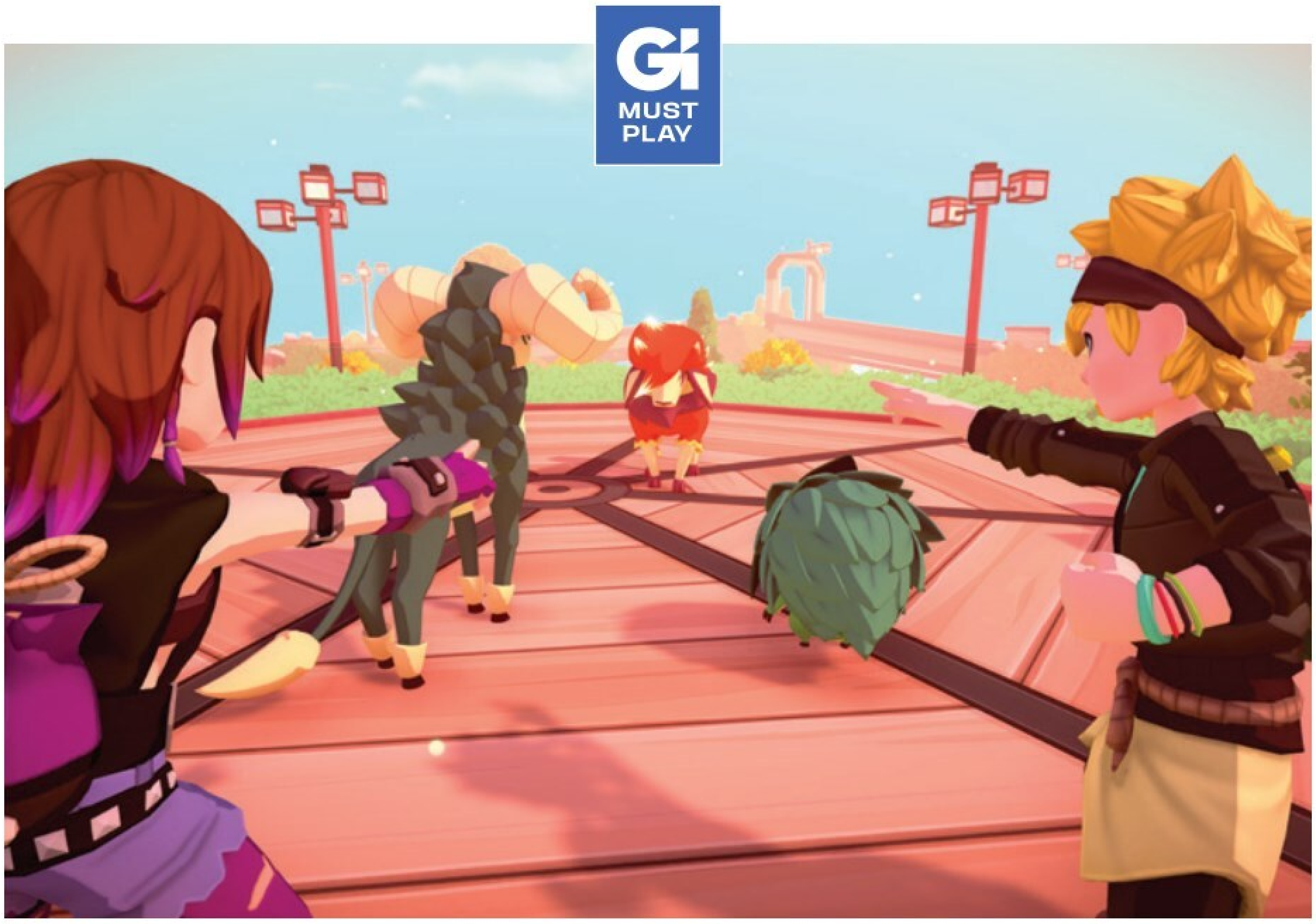
Splatoon 3 doesn't reinvent the wheel, nor does it need to. Instead, it improves nearly every franchise element in sometimes small but meaningful ways. With an already-robust set of content available at launch and at least two years of free and premium content on the horizon, Splatoon 3 is simultaneously the series' best entry and its most promising. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8.5

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter (8-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo **RELEASE** September 9 **RATING** E10+

TEMTEM

Competitive evolution



The Pokémon franchise has been more prolific than usual as of late, with multiple releases over the past year and another big entry coming soon. However, those without a Switch or looking for a suitable monster-battling alternative should focus on Temtem, which has emerged from years of early-access development. While borrowing heavily from the formula of Game Freak's massive franchise, its world is fun to explore, and collecting and learning all about the titular Temtems is satisfying. Although the core adventure is a smidge repetitive, Temtem is challenging and engaging, even for well-seasoned trainers.

Your Temtem journey begins by selecting a partner monster and setting off to challenge the various dojos (Temtem's version of gyms) around the Airborne Archipelago. While exploring this series of vibrant floating islands, you gain rivals, challenge dojos, and butt heads with the dastardly Clan Balsoto along the way. The pieces of a classic Pokémon experience are here for better or worse, and while that predictability bored me in the early hours, the story eventually arrives in some cool places I didn't expect, making Temtem feel more like an "us against the world" JRPG than a typical monster collector tends to.

The biggest draw to this genre for me is collecting as many of these cute and destructive creatures as possible. While the lack of variety and abundance of forgettable designs in the first island disappointed me, each subsequent area introduces more enticing monster designs and elemental combinations. My favorites include the deceptively cute Adoroboros and the fiery electric scarab Scaravolt. Figuring out the location of a monster I needed to fill out my Tempedia or one that would complement my current competitive team was a blast.

The hunt for new Temtems is exciting, but I'm even higher on the battle system. These fights are strategic and challenging to the point where every tamer battle made me consider my team composition right down to the order of my squad. Contrary to the way most trainers compete in Pokémon battles, the default way to throwdown in Temtem is 2v2. It's a twist I enjoy that deepens the strategy in just about every battle. I often had to solve battle-based puzzles, like whether my active team is the dominant duo on the board or if they'll be quickly wiped out by well-matched opposition, with the latter case happening quite often.

Another wrinkle I love in battle is the stamina system. Each move uses a portion of the Temtem's stamina gauge, with lighter blows consuming far less than haymakers. However, using more stamina than what's available takes HP, creating a high-risk, high-reward scenario for making a desperate all-out attack at the cost of your team's health. It's a clever solution to spamming powerful attacks and it results in more deliberate fights, especially when going toe-to-toe with other aspiring tamers.

The online features flourish when I interact with others. Throughout the adventure, you see tamers running around with their partner 'Tem in tow. You can challenge them to a battle, trade, or chat about where to find a monster. An always-available rolling text chat also lets you talk with a world full of active players freely. The lack of a barrier to communicating or participating in fights and grouping up with others is refreshing for the genre and should be looked at seriously by companies like Nintendo as a feature to strive for.

There's plenty to do with tamers online after the main scenario is done. On top of the competitive activities on hand, like joining a club and participating in Dojo Wars, I've kept busy with Temtem breeding, skimming auctions for monsters and items, and exploring the player housing neighborhoods that can be decorated with furnishings purchased all across the Archipelago. With all of the above and more to do, there's plenty of endgame content for those who wish to stick with the game long-term.

Temtem may look like a copycat on its surface, but its deviations from the Pokémon formula pay off considerably. With unique battling elements and an engaging MMO structure, Temtem evolves as its own experience and offers a vast, challenging adventure that even those without a Nintendo console can enjoy.

BY JOHN CARSON

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE Role-Playing/MMO
PUBLISHER Humble Games **DEVELOPER** Crema
RELEASE September 6 **RATING** E10+

METAL: HELLSINGER

A rhythmic symphony of destruction

Metal: Hellsinger knows precisely what it is from the second it begins: a love letter to fast-paced first-person shooters, especially Doom, and a tribute to metal music and the culture surrounding it. It's a no-frills shooter that asks, "What if you had to blow demons to bits to the beat of a metal album made by genre greats?" It excels at answering that question. It's not perfect – the bosses are uninspired at times, and it could use more variety in combat design – but my criticisms mattered little to my overall enjoyment of my 11-hour playthrough. What the game gets right far outshines what it doesn't, and the developer, The Outsiders, has created what I hope is just the start of a new FPS franchise set in Hell.

Music plays throughout your experience, whether it's in the game's fantastic campaign taking you through realms of Hell, or its trials, which unlock sigils used to strengthen your loadout during the story mode. If you like Trivium, Lamb of God, and other bands in the genre and enjoy guns with a fiery kick, Metal: Hellsinger is already worth the price of admission. I gunned down a massive skeletal boss to the beat of a near-operatic song backed by iconic vocals from System of a Down's Serj Tankian. I ripped through hordes of enemy mobs and behemoth demons to Arch Enemy's Alissa White-Gluz's death-metal melodies. Thanks to precise and punchy shooting mechanics, it was as enthralling as it sounds.

You use one of six different weapons to attack hundreds of demons, and the game rewards you with extra damage if you fire each bullet bullet in-sync with the on-screen metronome doubling as your reticle. Streaks increase your damage output and score modifier. What's unique about this streak counter is that each new level adds a new layer to the music track. At 2x, you might hear a bass rumbling and a guitar's subtle whine, rearing for what's to come. At 4x, the drums might kick in. Reach 8x, and the song begins to roar, missing just the vocals, which complete the track at 16x.

Climbing from 2x to 16x remained as exciting the umpteenth time as it was when I first did it. It feels like bringing a song to life, like a producer, except you're doing it with weapons that rip Hell's demons to pieces.

All of this is happening because of The Unknown, banished to the deepest realms of Hell where only ice and lowly demons remain. The Unknown progresses from the iciest domains to the fieriest alongside a talking skull voiced by Troy Baker – he brings a southern drawl that matches the game's almost Western-like tone – to find and kill The Judge, a slithering ruler losing her grasp on Hell, excellently voiced by Jennifer Hale.

There's not much else to the game besides this campaign, but that's okay, because what's there is outstanding. There are nine levels and 21 associated Torments, which are challenging time trials. Metal: Hellsinger is short and sweet, but it ends at precisely the right time when it reaches the climax of both its story and its built-in metal album.

I have minor gripes with the game, like the Torments, which sometimes feel unfair, and its boss and combat design, which could use more variety, but these minor critiques mattered little to how much I enjoyed playing Metal: Hellsinger.

I likely won't remember my minute frustrations a few months from now, but I will remember "Dissolution," a Two Feathers track with cathartic vocals from Bjorn "Speed" Strid of Soilwork, the Nihil realm of Hell, and the way my shotgun obliterated waves of enemies there. I'm so glad Metal: Hellsinger ends with the promise of more to come because I already want more from this series.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Funcom
DEVELOPER The Outsiders
RELEASE September 15 **RATING** M

NBA 2K23

A hop-step forward

NBA 2K23, the latest in Visual Concepts' long-running, annualized basketball series, introduces multiple new features and revamped game mechanics while taking us on a stroll down memory lane. Though the 2K franchise has garnered a reputation for focusing more on microtransactions than actual gameplay innovation, this year's game mode additions and foundational improvements mostly overshadow the notorious pay-to-win schemes. The result is a package that feels more novel than other titles in the series' recent history.

2K's mechanics have primarily followed a successful blueprint, but this year introduces several updates, most notably the reworked shot meters and stamina bars. The new shot meter leaves little room for error, making it more challenging than previous iterations. Thanks to these stricter release-timing mechanics, I initially struggled with mastering this updated feature. Additionally, the stamina system in 2K23 has also been modified and now includes three adrenaline bars. Sprinting and using explosive dribble moves now deplete the bars, which is especially helpful in online matches as it prevents individual players from over-dribbling and encourages team play.

These improvements to the core gameplay permeate the vast array of modes on offer in NBA 2K23. This suite includes all the series' mainstays and a few exciting new ones, like the Jordan Challenge, which allows you to relive iconic moments from Michael Jordan's career, and MyNBA Eras. The former offers fun challenges, each with its accomplishments to recreate.

In contrast, instead of reliving history, MyNBA Eras enables us to rewrite it by giving four NBA periods to choose from, each having its own varying rules and rosters. These types of experiences are precisely the kinds of innovation the series has been missing in recent years, and its inclusion in 2K23 does wonders for rounding out this entry's offerings.

If you're looking for more traditional 2K modes, MyCareer remains one of the essential features of any 2K release. This year's storyline leaves a lot to be desired, and the lack of choices makes it feel less like I'm crafting my own player's career and more like I'm pushing through a predetermined narrative.

However, the bulk of the improvements in MyCareer went into restructuring The City, the hub where you access the majority of your activities. Here, Visual Concepts fully embraces its RPG aspects with the retention of its quest system and the addition of The Arena, where MyCareer events are now fully integrated. The inclusion of both features gives players a fully immersive experience, and the gameday events make this mode feel even more like an NBA player's career.

As usual, MyTeam includes a variety of themed solo challenges and matches available where you can earn rewards to help boost your team. If you prefer the casual 2K experience as I do, MyTeam has plenty to offer in terms of its offline, single-player modes. Ultimately though, microtransactions are as present as ever in NBA 2K23. Grinding out MyTeam points and tokens is an option for those not willing to spend beyond the game's premium price tag, but spending real money to buy packs is the easiest way to acquire a stacked squad.

Overall, NBA 2K23 is a fitting tribute to the historical legends and iconic moments that made this sport what it is today. Though the game has its fair share of issues with poor narrative choices and omnipresent microtransactions, it's still a solid improvement over the previous game. This year's release isn't quite the flashy free-throw line dunk that earns a perfect score, but it is a worthy effort that would earn M.J.'s shrug of approval. **BY NICO VERGARA**

7.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Sports (10-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** 2K Games
DEVELOPER Visual Concepts **RELEASE** September 9 **RATING** E

MADDEN NFL 23

A short gain to start a new drive

In Madden NFL 23, developer EA Tiburon focused on the fundamentals: authentic 11v11 football and cleaning up many bugs plaguing previous Madden iterations. The result is a small step forward for the franchise and a strong foundation to build upon.

The most significant changes in Madden NFL 23 are under the surface. The team at EA calls it FieldSense, a shift to more physics-based interactions on the field. In practice, it's a mostly positive change. Running the ball between bodies is chaotic and violent, true to the real-world game. There are occasional issues; would-be tacklers tend to slide off whoever is running the ball like they are coated in Teflon. The way defenses wrap up opponents and how ball carriers fight for extra yards feels authentic, but the high frequency of fumbles needs adjustment. It's imperfect but a solid first implementation of a system that should improve with future iterations.

The overall presentation is a noticeable step forward. From boot up, everything is awash with the legacy of the late John Madden. It's a fitting tribute to the man behind the name. Updated scans of equipment and players look excellent, and the gameday presentation features more vibrant graphical overlays and cinematic camera work that feel more like an NFL broadcast. The authenticity of it all is appealing, and I skipped fewer transitions during games to enjoy the presentation.

The much-ballyhooed Skill-Based Passing adds an interesting (and optional) wrinkle to throwing the football. Having a target area and reticle takes a bit of getting used to, but the additional control over ball location does make a difference, especially for avoiding defenders while throwing over the middle of the field. It quickly became second nature, and I sorely missed the fine aiming controls when I went back to play a game in Madden 22. The passing meter, on the other hand, is a non-factor.

BRONCOS
BRONCOS
BRO

Generally, my muscle memory for how long to hold a pass button lined up with perfect passes and turning the feature off or on didn't make a noticeable impact on the field.

The other updates are mixed. Connected Franchise adds Motivations and Tags. Motivations affect how willing free agents are to join your team; bad teams may struggle signing someone looking to play for a contender, for example. Tags give some players a defined role, like an XP-boosting Mentor. Both are nice additions that humanize the players but could affect balance in competitive leagues. Corner is a new position for Face of the Franchise, but the frequent lack of involvement in plays makes it a frustrating position.

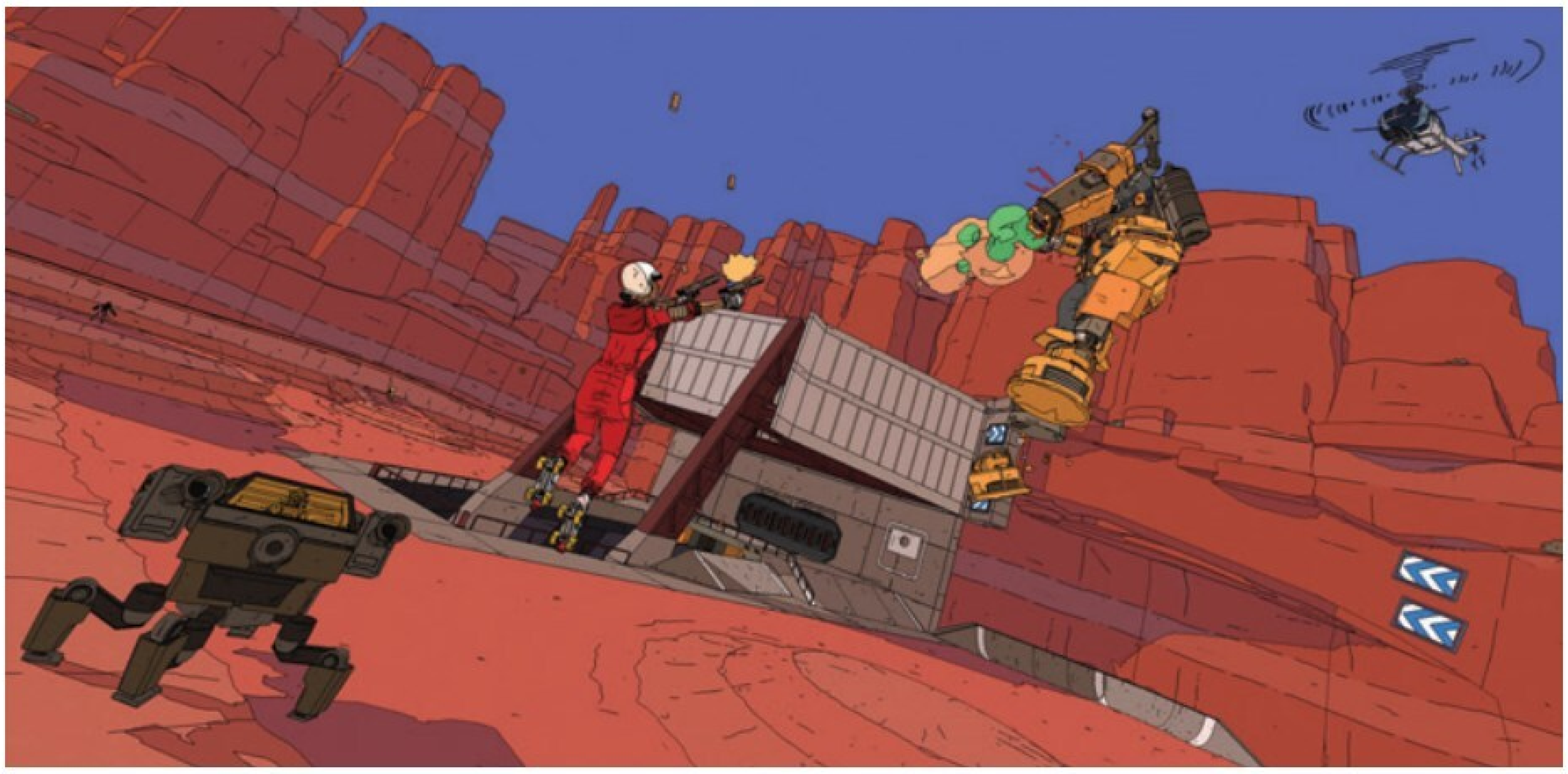
The Madden NFL series has long had a solid gameplay foundation, maintained by small improvements year over year. Madden NFL 23 is the first iteration in a long time that rebuilds that foundation, and that's where this year's greatest success lies. Some slippery collisions aside, the more physics-based action is a good change, and the control over ball placement from Skill-Based passing is a welcome addition. This comes at the cost of only minor updates to the core gameplay modes, but it was ultimately the right call to make, and Madden NFL 23 is a better game for it. **BY JUSTIN KOREIS**

7.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Sports (6-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** EA Sports
DEVELOPER EA Tiburon **RELEASE** August 19 **RATING** E

ROLLERDROME

A dystopian delight



My roller skates come to life, whirling loudly on concrete before drowning out to the murderous symphony of shotgun blasts and rocket explosions. I spin to avoid a hail of bullets, latch my skates onto a rail, and then flip through the air, my guns blazing as I perform a flashy trick to bring the crowd to its feet. I hope this run creates a big enough death combo to reach a high score and unlock the next stage, where more powerful weapons and foes await. This is Rollerdrome, a skating-shooter that blends the trick system of Tony Hawk's Pro Skater with the kill chains of Doom 2016 to create an exciting dystopian experience that makes you feel like a god on wheels.

Roll7, the team behind the OlliOlli series, is locked in on almost every aspect of this game, delivering enticing skating freedom, challenges that require devotion, comic-book visuals that leap off the screen, and a fascinating science-fiction vision stripped right out of 1970s cinema. Rollerdrome is a love letter to James Caan's classic film *Rollerball*, following the same theme of corporations ruling the planet and using the poor as contestants in a blood sport. Even the skaters' uniforms are similar in design and color. The retro vibe and inspirations work well to create a fascinating backdrop for skating. When playing Rollerdrome, the comparison points to other games and entertainment are crystal clear, but they unite to create something unique.

The concept of the gameplay is simple: Skate or die. If you stop moving, a sniper will pick you off, or a mech will blow you to kingdom come. You travel the globe to different arenas, each designed like a skate park with a sea of ramps and rails to help you gain speed and soar. You use these playgrounds to earn advantage points to attack militant groups hired by mega-corporations. They are disposable and are here to highlight the skills of the contestants. You assume the role of a rookie named Kara Hassan, who you never get a good look at since her back is always to you and she's wearing a helmet, but her skills are undeniable and, more importantly, great fun to display.

When Kara rips into an area, chaos hits to thunderous applause and doesn't relent until the last body collapses to the floor. Her movements are swift and fluid, and the most significant actions are easy to perform, such as launching off a half pipe or spinning through the air while simultaneously firing a machinegun. Roll7 did a phenomenal job with the controls, making them intuitive to the point that they quickly become muscle memory and don't require much more than a single button press. The timing windows for specific moves are also fantastic, making evading sniper fire not just a cinch but an integral part of the combo system. If you can perform a perfect evade, your point total ticks up.

In the first few levels, I skated with the sole intent of winning and moving on to the next stage. But the game's progression system requires more than this. To reach the second tier of stages, Kara must first complete a specific number of mini objectives. These tasks range from achieving high scores to downing specific enemy types in particular ways. These goals are Pro Skater-like but do lead to some frustration if you don't want to try your hand in the same battles numerous times.

I felt a little frustration in the later levels, yet I adored how the challenges pushed me to find and execute huge combo strings to reach higher scores. The combo meter multiplier only advances on kills, so you must figure out how to reach and kill enemies in a timely order. These foes spawn across the arena, and your ammo reserve only replenishes when you perform tricks, so you are constantly trying to dazzle the crowd or down an adversary. It's a phenomenal mix of two distinct gaming disciplines. The gunplay fits nicely with the skating, thanks to one of the most generous lock-on targeting systems you'll see. The focus is on gaining ammo and timing shots, which is fantastic given your character's breakneck speed and them often being airborne.

The retro sci-fi setting fits the action, but don't expect much from the story. You'll hear voices in the locker room that advance specific plot points and gain more insight into the world through notes and newspaper clippings, but they don't add up to much – all the excitement is in the arena.

Rollerdrome immediately clicked with me, and I ate it all up. As polished and fun as the experience is, it feels like Roll7 is just dipping its toes into the water. I hope this talented studio gets the chance to make a sequel to further flesh out this unique concept with more detail in the story and greater player progression. Regardless, Rollerdrome is a fantastic first foot forward. I adored the campaign gameplay and have a feeling my friend group will use this unique title for late-night scoring competitions.

BY ANDREW REINER

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Private Division
DEVELOPER Roll7 **RELEASE** August 16 **RATING** M

OOBLETS

Ooblets offers solid fun, and I enjoy its cheerful tone. I only wish playing it didn't feel so much like work. Despite the pride I had in my farm, clearing checklists eventually felt more laborious than satisfying. There's fun to be had as long as you're willing to work for it. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

6.75

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Glumberland **DEVELOPER** Glumberland **RELEASE** September 1 **RATING** E

BLOSSOM TALES II: THE MINOTAUR PRINCE

Blossom Tales II does little to hide its Zelda inspiration. While it doesn't reach the heights of Nintendo's legendary franchise, it does smooth over many of the early-'90s design conventions present in games like A Link to the Past to deliver an adventure able to be enjoyed by players of all experience levels. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8.25

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Playtonic Friends
DEVELOPER Castle Pixel **RELEASE** August 16 **RATING** E

SOUL HACKERS 2

Throughout the 30 hours it took to hit credits, I kept trying to latch onto the elements that work. Soul Hackers 2's saving grace lies in its main characters, each with a distinct personality that often clashes with the rest. **BY DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO**

6.5

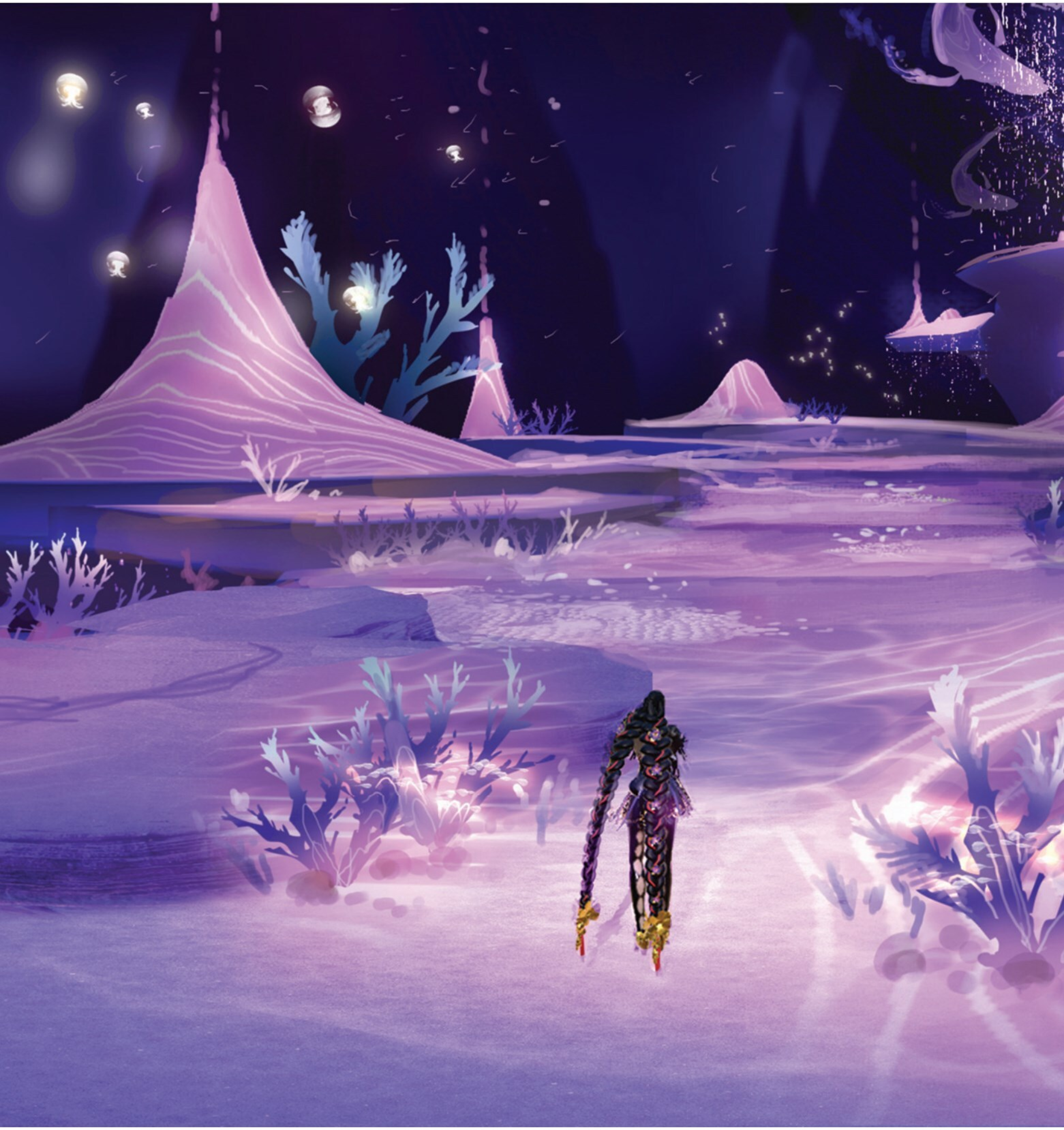
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Sega **DEVELOPER** Atlus
RELEASE August 25 **RATING** M

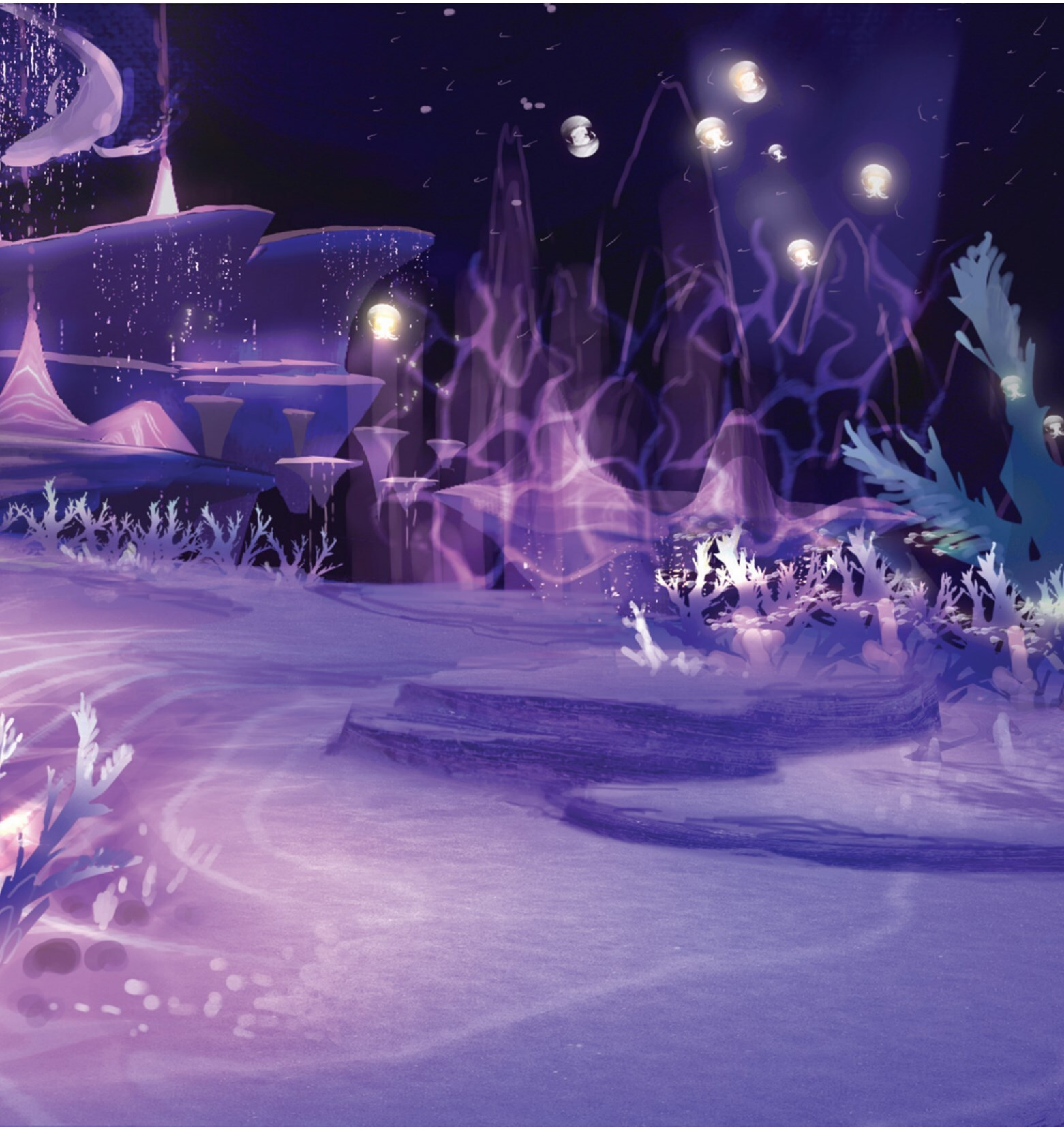
SAINTS ROW

While a little irritating, I was never bored and wanted to see where my team's goofy antics would take them next. The payoffs are often worth the time investment, and just veering off the beaten path pays dividends. I'm glad the Saints are back, hopefully for another long haul. **BY ANDREW REINER** ■

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Deep Silver
DEVELOPER Volition **RELEASE** August 23 **RATING** M





↘ **From our cover story:** Expect to explore a variety of bizarre landscapes as you hop between universes.

Developed by PlatinumGames / Published by Nintendo

ONE LAST THING

PASSING THE TORCH

HIDEKI KAMIYA IS A LEGEND in the action game genre, helping shape and direct projects like Devil May Cry (2001), Viewtiful Joe (2003), Ōkami (2003), the original Bayonetta (2009), and The Wonderful 101 (2013). While Yūsuke Hashimoto directed Bayonetta 2, for the third game, directorial duties are passing to Yusuke Miyata. Kamiya had this to share on their partnership on the upcoming project.

"Since the very beginning of this project, Director Miyata and I worked on solidifying the concept for the game, as we made sure to maintain close communication every step of the way. From my perspective, Bayonetta 3 can be best summed up as 'a massive explosion of everything Director Miyata wanted to do.'

"Bayonetta 3 may be his first game with him in the director's chair, but he has always been a talented creator with whom I have had the pleasure to work for many years now. Miyata was chosen to direct this game as we were fully aware of his capabilities and talent as a creator. Having him in this position has allowed me to witness that he is truly a man who knows what he wants and who is able to execute his vision with machine-like efficiency." *– Hideki Kamiya* ■

Hear what you've been missing, for less.

GameStop

SPONSORED CONTENT

Atrix AX-1150 Universal Wired Gaming Headset

~~$54.99~~ $49.99

Atrix AX-1250 Wireless Gaming Headset for PlayStation/PC

~~$99.99~~ $69.99

Also available in white and black.

Atrix Headset Charging and Audio Stand

$34.99

PRICES SUBJECT TO CHANGE

BAYONETTA 3™